

## MINNIE YUVIENCO

From Best of New York to Best of Dairy

Once in a while the NDA comes across a different kind of individual, other than an ordinary farmer, who would express interest to become a dairy farmer. Over the years, the Visayas Field Office welcomed doctors, and other business persons as potential dairy farmers.

This time, a new player in the field is one of Cebu's famous couturiers, Minerva Sotto Yuvienco, granddaughter of the late Sen. Vicente Sotto, daughter of two physicians, Drs. Merito and Suga-Sotto Yuvienco, and owner of Cebu's famous boutique, Best of New York.

One would expect Minnie to have opted for the medical profession what with both parents as physicians, or have gone into politics, after her grandfather. But her love for art took over, as some eight years after she finished Business Administration in 1964 in Maryknoll College, (now Miriam) College, she took a course in Fashion Design at the Traphagen Fashion School in New York City. This eventually led to the establishment of a boutique called The Best of New York in the early nineties.

With Best of New York Boutique expanding into three branches, Minnie held fashion shows in Cebu, in other cities in the Visayas and reached as far as Davao City. Lately though, Minnie decided to close her mall branches because the garment industry is slowing down. Contributory factors are cheap imports and the ukay ukay (slightly used clothes) business.

Minnie designs clothes, getting her ideas from abroad as she travels a lot. Her ideal model should be tall, slim, must have a nice bone frame. A model need not be beautiful as make up will take care of that her face. But what really makes a woman beautiful, Minnie feels, are her accomplishments her personality and her appearance.

One wonders over the jump from fashion design to dairy. What has made her interested in dairy, which is an entirely different world from designing clothes? Minnie relates that when she was in college, she actually liked farming but felt that it was not a field for women and did not see where she would fit. She was at what she called a "frivolous stage", and was more concerned for her skin, and the damage it might get if it were exposed to the sun. Nevertheless, she muses that if she were a man, "I would have been a farmer".

Today, she has no choice as the farm, a six hectare lot which she now manages, is an inheritance from her father, Dr. Merito Yuvienco.

Dr. Yuvienco, like two other doctors in dairy, fancied managing a ranch someday, with his two sons. They did in fact own a ranch in Bayawan, Negros Oriental. But with the sons migrating to the States, and the only daughter so steeped in her passion for fashion design, the doctor eventually sold the ranch seeing that none of his children would ever join him in achieving his farming plans.

Had her father only foreseen a future where his daughter would eventually take to farming with the same passion for clothes, he would have kept the ranch and turned it over to her.

He would have been proud to know that her herd of 54 dairy animals, 14 of which are on the milk line, is producing the best milk among the milking herd of Cebu. Her passion for fashion is now rechanneling itself into a passion for dairy farming.

This new passion is manifested even in her sleeping habits. If she used to go to bed with fashion magazines, some years back, she now sleeps with a growing collection of stuffed toy Holstein cows, much to the amusement of her granddaughter.

Minnie heard about dairy from other farmers in the mountain barangay of Guba, Cebu City, and was immediately interested to try. Her mom though was not in favor of it because Minnie knew nothing at all about dairy farming. But she attended seminars, does research on the internet and involves herself in the affairs of the Cebu Federation of Dairy Cooperatives. She attended her first Dairy Congress in Camarines Sur, last May 2009.

Like any new farmer, she finds that there are also downsides to dairy. Being in the city, she realized that there is indeed a lack of arable land and one cannot expand as land in the city is expensive. A six-hectare lot will never be enough for dairy expansion.

Where she used to deal with inanimate objects such as cloth, buttons, and thread, which can always be repatterned, she finds that handling dairy cows is an entirely different matter.

For one, cows do get sick. She also added the term "mastitis" to her vocabulary and learned to apply the principle of "preventive veterinary medicine" for her dairy animals. For Minnie, taking preventive action is better than cure because treatment can be expensive. Minnie is grateful that her interest in dairy has come at a time when there are veterinarians who know how manage dairy animals. "Thanks to NDA, we have the services of veterinarians who are knowledgeable in dairy cow management".

At one point, with all the NDA vets out in the field, she decided to seek the help of private veterinarians only to find out, with great dismay, that the private vets she consulted had little or no knowledge, if at all, of dairy cow physiology.

But dairy has its up sides and she especially feels this when her cows calve and there is more milk produced.

Still, she foresees that dairy has a bright future because the Filipino is starting to appreciate the taste of fresh milk. While she sells most of her milk produce to the Cebu Federation of Dairy Cooperatives, she also sells some at her residence in the posh subdivision Paradise Village, in Banilad, Cebu City. She is amazed over the idea that even ordinary people (drivers, security guards) who get to know that she is selling fresh milk, find their way to her place and buy the milk. So who says the Filipinos are not milk drinkers?

Having managed a business and kept it going for twenty years, Minnie already knows what a manager should be especially for the still to expand dairy industry of Cebu City. A dairy manager must have knowledge in marketing. One who can go beyond the myth that milk cannot be sold during the rainy season. Apparently she has done her scanning of the environment and she breaks into a laugh at such a ridiculous idea, knowing from experience that people in colder climates

buy milk because it is a need and not because of the weather. She insists that "There should be a better system of distributing fresh milk, and catering to the needs of ordinary people. The supermarkets are more for the well-heeled..." and again another peal of laughter as she remembered that she is actually one of the "well-heeled" set.

While she still intends to travel abroad, future travels may no longer be to sell clothes or to look for fashion designs but to trade processed cheese once she gets a substantial volume of milk.

Minnie feels that the time has come for her to retire. She felt tired of doing the same thing again and again, although she still keeps the clothes shop in Guadalupe, Cebu City, open, as there are still many who come to her for their blouses, dresses or gowns, despite the fact that the cost of one item would be around a thousand pesos or more.

Many individuals look forward to retirement. Of late, with the economic slump and the instability of institutions which should be taking care of people once they retire, more and more individuals look towards retirement with fear.

But Minnie takes her strength from reading the Bible and from stepping forward in faith. Not to retire, but to "re – tire", or to simply change the worn out wheels of one's car with new ones, and to drive along an entirely different highway. From the Best of New York, to the Best of Dairy.



In an interview with Project Development Officer Ching Pakaew