



How Cindy Castro Is Setting the Standard for Responsible Fashion

The fashion designer behind Cindy Castro New York shares how her childhood in Ecuador, and the waste and labor practices she witnessed in her early years in the fashion industry shaped her commitment to building a responsible luxury women's ready to wear brand.

Alicia Menendez:

Cindy Castro spent the early part of her fashion career amazed by the amount of waste the industry created and how they treated workers. So when she decided to launch a ready-to-wear women's line, she knew she wanted to be mindful of the impact on the environment and the value of the labor that brought her visions to life. The result is Cindy Castro New York, a brand I love in part because the woman behind it is so talented and so clear about what matters. Cindy, hi.

Cindy Castro:

Hi, Alicia. So great to be here.

Menendez:

Tell me about growing up in Ecuador and sort of is there a moment that is clear to you where you realize if I want to pursue the things I want to pursue, then the best course of action is for me to move to the United States?

Castro:

It didn't happen like that. So growing up, I think I just realized there was a lot of inequality in my country. Because I come from a small town, I did see a lot of poverty. And when my sisters went to college, we're three sisters, we are each seven years apart, so I barely lived with my first sister. When they went to college, my dad sent them to the capital of Ecuador. We would travel and I just remember just seeing so many kids in the streets, so just many moms, and that's the main thing for me. What impacted me was just inequality and my dad telling me you need to go to school because you need to be able to provide for yourself. You cannot wait for a man to provide for yourself. I came to the US as an au pair. My plan was just to be here for a year and to kind of see what else is out there.

Menendez:

But then what happens?

Castro:

I met my husband, Henry, and he's actually the one who encouraged me to study fashion. I had told them about the whole thing that I've always wanted to do fashion, but that's something that my parents couldn't afford. So he was the first person in this country to help me to do community college, to how to apply for loans and credit cards and things like that. So I was able to stay and do that because of him.

Menendez:

I love all these feminist men in your life, Cindy, who are ushering you in the right direction.

Castro:

There is just a few, not a lot, but I think this is something that I like to share because I feel like if we would have more of them, our lives, women's lives would be so different.

Menendez:

You spend about a decade in the industry, you work with brands including Parker NY, KaufmanFranco, Derek Lam. What were the types of jobs that you were doing in the early part of your career?

Castro:

Yeah, so I started as an assistant designer and also as an atelier assistant, which is managing the sewers, managing the cutter rooms, and also talking to designers, talking to the pattern makers. So there is a lot of departments. There's also like production department, the sales department, and I did do a little bit of all of that, but my main focus was on design. You do everything from developing fabrics, developing prints, to sketching. You don't start sketching really until later, maybe as an associate designer. That's what I really, really wanted to do. So you get to do all the back end like making copies of sketches, recoloring, tracing patterns, correcting patterns, going to the sample rooms, talking to the manufacturers overseas.

Menendez:

You talk a lot about the amount of waste you saw in the industry. Can you give me an example of what fashion waste looks like beyond our own individual consumption and deposit?

Castro:

It's really bad. One, it's not only the waste that goes when you cut the garments, but also a lot of designers, even today, they present collections that are like 50 to 150 and a lot of these pieces, they don't go to production. So there is a lot of waste within development and then also during production because you over cut. What's sad about also fashion industry, Alicia, is that the product lives on the floor for only about a month, and then you go the next month and you're like, okay, this is going to be on sale. So that's our mentality already. I'm just going to wait for a month and it's really painful because my collections, we take about six to eight months to develop a collection. A collection that is less than 15 pieces because we are taking the time to develop these pieces and we also don't want to overproduce, and then that just goes to waste.

Menendez:

What happens that you decide it is time to step out on your own and launch your own women's ready-to-wear line?

Castro:

Well, it happened during the pandemic. I lost my job. It was one of the few jobs where I was actually happy because of the environment. The environment in the fashion industry can be a little too much as far as like too competitive, not understanding that we are being overworked, too many hours, and just not having a balance. And I was let go because of the pandemic and I had started thinking about having my own thing because I just didn't see other women doing it.

I didn't want to stop doing what I love the most, but I did want to find a purpose and just working for other companies and not having a direct impact on my community, that's when I said I do want to start my own company where I can represent my community, where I can help other Latino immigrants like myself, and where I can also create transparency

because there is a huge lack of transparency in the fashion industry. We don't know where the garments come from. We don't know who is making the garments, and also more than 90% of the garments in the world are made out of fossil fuels, are made out of synthetics. I said we have to use only sustainable fabrics, and sustainable fabrics meaning biodegradable fabrics.

Menendez:

You have multiple purposes baked into your business because there is the eco-friendly part, the sustainability part of this. There's also the social responsibility piece of making sure that everyone who touches that garment from concept to execution is being paid a fair wage. Give me a sense of what a seamstress in a sample room is making at your average retailer and what it is someone like you is paying a seamstress per hour.

Castro:

We actually just signed the FABRIC Act, which is a proposal for people to be making more than minimum wage. I didn't know that Here in the US, there are sewers that are being paid per garment. That means that it might take you five hours to make that garment, but you're only being paid per garment, not per hour. So we pay our sewers more than minimum wage starting at \$21, unless you are like entry level I would say \$18. But our current sewer, it's \$21 and the sample rooms that we work with, they pay their sewers more than minimum wage as well.

Menendez:

It's wild to think about someone getting paid per garment and the stress that then puts on that worker to accomplish as many garments as they can as quickly as they can simply so that they can make a bare minimum.

Castro:

But I think it's because we are used to seeing fashion more and more now as disposable, something disposable. So what I'm trying to show, it's like, no, this garment, this piece has an identity. There was someone that created it and this someone has years of experience doing it. And also it's creating opportunities. It's not only like, yes, I'm creating this company because I want my community to feel represented. I'm also creating this company because I want to create opportunities for these people to grow.

Menendez:

I will admit to you, I grew up wearing hand-me-downs. I have a mother who I don't know has ever purchased anything full price, and so I didn't grow up spending money on clothes even as I became a young adult professional. It just is not usual for me. So when I see a price tag, \$300, \$400, there's still very much of me that just winces at that because even if I know this is a garment I will have for the next 10 years, this is a garment I would wear once a week, there's a part of me that is not conditioned to spend that type of money on clothing. You have helped me understand what goes into a garment that costs \$400. Talk me through it. Talk me through the finances of a garment from concept to execution and what is reflected in that price point?

Castro:

It's really the labor. So we put a lot of hours into sketching, developing, and then we have the time to sew. More than 80% now it's done here in New York City. We pay a pattern maker to create the pattern. We paid a fit model to come in and try on the clothing once we have it. And then we have to go through a couple of alterations to fix the patterns. And then we go into sewing the final samples. And throughout all of this, we also dye fabrics, we create prints, so it's very, very costly because this process goes during six to eight months.

Then after that, you have to put into the labels, we are using organic cotton labels. The packaging, we're using packaging that it comes from corn and it's biodegradable. You can put it in your garden and it becomes food. So it's the whole package that goes into that one garment. And it's also a creation. It's a unique piece that you have. I take hours draping it. I take hours drawing, working on the pattern, elevating that piece. Prints are drawn by hand by an artist, and that's also exclusive just for the brand. So it's also about having a unique piece.

Menendez:

I want to say as someone who owns two of your pieces, that there is a different response that your pieces elicit from other women. Other women are always like, oh, I love that. Where is that dress from? There is an element of intrigue because it doesn't look like everything else that is out there. It stirs something in people where they recognize that it is not mass-produced. You were definitely hitting that mark. When you launched the first year, what was the biggest mistake you made, Cindy?

Castro:

Wow, what's the biggest mistake I made? Oh my gosh, I have to think about that, Alicia. I can't...

Menendez:

I love that that's your answer because normally my answer is like, hold on, let me make a list and I'll start at the beginning.

Castro:

Well, I just feel like since my first year, I'm on my third year, I'm still learning and I'm still making mistakes. I do think one of the biggest mistakes, it didn't happen in my first year, it actually recently happened, is trusting manufacturers. I started working with a company and we were doing samples, and because we're a small brand, they always put us in the back end and we're not a priority. So I think one of my biggest mistakes has been not to have everything in writing and signed, and I'm also a small company, so it's not like I have a lawyer to review everything. But even when you do that, I just feel like when a company doesn't want to work with you because you're small, they just drop you and that's what happened to me this year. I was crying for something that I worked for eight months and all of a sudden they stopped replying to emails and they didn't send anything.

Menendez:

Well, how did you turn that around?

Castro:

Oh my gosh. What I ended up doing is I ended up dividing the collection. What didn't come, I ended up creating as spring 2024. And I just made my Resort 2024 smaller and I started redeveloping my collection.

Menendez:

I love that.

Castro:

I don't know how I did that because at one point I did feel like that's it. I'm not going to have a collection. That's what I thought; I'm not going to have a collection. There were weeks where I couldn't sleep because it wasn't on my hands. It's not like I can do this and all the development that we did for six months, the prints, the fabrics, and signs are going to appear. But it just taught me to find other solutions and to redirect things.

Menendez:

Cindy, when you talk about building a collection and garments that have a relationship to one another and an inspiration, where are you going? What are you doing to build that vision, first, and then second, how are you editing out things that you might love but that don't actually fit the core concept of a season's collection?

Castro:

I'm very inspired by women's strengths and vulnerability, and I know that for me, fashion is transformative. I am that woman who is like a go-getter, so whenever I put on something, this is like, okay, I can do this. That's how I feel. And when I think of a collection, I do think of the place. For example, for my Resort collection, we thought of a Mediterranean vacation and that she's going to Morocco, to Portugal, and so I get to see myself in that position. With the weather, what am I doing? Do I want to feel relaxed? Oh, it's the night, what do I want to wear? What does my woman want to wear? So yes, I do think about the weather, the colors, the silhouettes. And the editing part, I think I learned throughout my career, the years.

We had a team and we had a sales team, so just being part of that throughout the years. It's always like you can't have two long dresses competing. You have one short, one long, one off the shoulder, one on the shoulder, and that's what I apply when I'm doing that in my collection. And I also can't afford to do too many pieces, so I think that also forces me. And I have a slow fashion model, so I'm like, okay, this one goes out. This is my favorite. So when I think of them, they have to be functional. All of my pieces are very functional, all pieces that you can wear from day to night.

Menendez:

You have many gifts. Among your gifts I think there is the artistic and aesthetic vision that you have. I think there is this strong moral compass about the type of business you want to run. I might argue that your strongest skill above all else is your ability to build relationships and to network. I was at your first New York Fashion Week show and I was like, is that Carmen Perez? Is that Charlotte Castillo? I was like, this is like a who's who of Latina taste makers, power. I am infinitely impressed by the way in which you have networked across the country, celebrities, political thinkers. What is your secret?

Castro:

I'm such a shy person. I'm a very friendly person, but I'm not a person who likes to go to events alone, but the business pushed me. Every time that I dreaded to go to an event, I'm like, who else is going to show up for you, Cindy? Who else? No one. You have to go. And what I love about my pieces, Alicia, that my pieces start conversations. So I just show up and someone is like, oh my gosh, I love what you're wearing, and that's my opportunity to tell them my story. So then I introduce myself, I talk about the brand, and people that I've met, like you mentioned, these are Latinas that also want to create change. We find within each other that kind of sentiment and that we're in this together. So I feel like people can relate.

And I'm also surprised, and I think it's because the women that've been able to meet here in the US in this past year, and that started with me participating at WeAllGrow Latina at their market, these are women that have influenced me so much and they inspire me so much, including you, because they are just out there really saying, hey, you should meet this person. Listening to my story and listening to other stories, I do want to say that it's important to go and participate and network. That's the only way. You have to be able to speak for yourself or your brand, and then there are other amazing women just like yourself that are going to be able to do the same for you.

Menendez:

Cindy, thank you so much for doing this.

Castro:

Thank you, it was my pleasure.

Menendez:

Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you, email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @LatinaToLatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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