



How Joanna Vargas Built a Beauty Empire with Her Hands

Echoing a sentiment shared by many successful children of immigrants, Joanna Vargas tells Alicia, “My parents did not send me to school so that I would work with my hands.” That understanding kept her from telling them about becoming an aesthetician. The irony of it all is that working with her hands to help celebrities like Rachel Weisz, Mindy Kaling, and Tatum O’Neal look and feel beautiful is precisely how she made a name for herself in the beauty business. Joanna talks about it all in this episode and her new book, *Glow From Within*.

Alicia Menendez:

Joanna Vargas keeps Hollywood’s skin looking amazing. She counts Julianne Moore, Rachel Brosnahan, Mindy Kaling, Sofia Coppola and Jake Gyllenhaal among her clients. Beyond the celebrity buzz, Joanna’s built a skin care empire that includes salons in New York and LA, natural beauty products that bear her name, and a new book, *Glow From Within*. We talk about how she built her empire and her best tips for glowing skin.

Joanna, I have read about your early morning routine and found it very inspiring. Can you tell me about your early mornings and how you developed that habit?

Joanna Vargas: As you and I both know, it’s challenging when you have kids and you’re working, and you know, to try to find time for yourself you have to be highly scheduled. And I’ve always been an early riser, and so instead of just waking up early and just sitting in bed, I decided to make it into a bit of a moment for myself, which I found has really helped me tremendously in terms of stress management and just making me feel like I did something good for myself every day. So, I wake up quite early and I do sit in bed for a little bit and just look at what’s happening in the universe, and then I get up and do a Peloton class, which really helps me manage stress and kind of invigorates me, and gets me day started nicely with some fun music and some dance vibes.

Menendez: You, like me, a busy mom. What is the bare minimum we each need to be doing to have good skin?

Vargas: I like to point out to people that good skin has nothing to do with your DNA and has everything to do with your lifestyle. The bare minimum would include getting enough rest, exercising, and eating not to be on a diet, but eating things that will give life to you. And then on the skin care side, it would be washing your face before bed, wearing sunscreen every day, and then I think sort of an essential ingredient in your arsenal would be a Vitamin C, ideally a Vitamin C serum for day to help protect your skin against cell mutation and sun damage. You could wear it under makeup, so those would be sort of like the bare minimum. Perhaps and exfoliation once or twice a week. If I could be-

Menendez: I love that your bare minimum is also my maximum. I’m like, “Okay, all right. Joanna, that’s enough.” How much of one’s skin do you think is about what you are putting into your body, versus what you are putting on your skin?

Vargas: You know, I'm an aesthetician, so obviously I believe in product, I believe in facials, but I think that your skin is maybe 70% what the rest of your life looks like. And good products are really important, but I think people discount completely how important it is to be healthy in your life. It's such an important part of having good skin and controlling breaking out, controlling dryness, controlling how we age. Obviously, I had to learn this as I got older and I'm turning 50 this year, and I feel like I understand a healthy lifestyle so much more than I did when I was young. I was so much more willing when I was young to kind of be like, "Oh, you don't have good skin." And in my case, my mother had darker skin than me and I always wished I had her skin. I got cursed with this fair skin with freckles and melasma, and we all have our things, right? And I think when you're younger it's easy to pick yourself apart, and when you get older you realize there's so much you could do for yourself to make yourself look good. And I think that my skin looks better than it's ever looked, even though I'm in my late forties, so...

Menendez: You do look good. Just for anyone listening, so they know, that skin is glowing. You grew up in Princeton, New Jersey, went to University of Chicago, studied Women's Studies. I'm also a Women's Studies major, so I love, and a New Jersey girl.

Vargas: Oh, cool!

Menendez: And photography. What did you plan to do with that?

Vargas: You know, I moved to New York with the dream of being a fashion photographer or an art photographer of some kind. I did get jobs in that field at the beginning in the first few years I was here. I just really realized very quickly that my personality, I was not made for that lifestyle. I was not made to be a freelancer. I was very shy. I was very quiet. The idea of self-promotion embarrassed me. And just being on set, I just felt so stressed out all the time, and so going to beauty school was sort of like, "Well, maybe I'll do makeup. Maybe I could be a part of the industry in some way and in a different way."

And when I got to beauty school, I really fell in love with the idea of taking care of somebody, and that one-on-one, you share with me what's troubling you and I'm gonna help you fix it. And to this day, that's really what I love about my career, and that's why I still do so many facials and I'm still in the mix, because I just love it.

Menendez: *Miss Juleyka! Nice to have you on. Must be a special reason.*

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Yeah, yeah. You know it's a special reason, since I like to be behind the scenes. All right, so when Cantu Beauty decided to come on board, I rushed-

Menendez: *You rushed to volunteer to try the products.*

Lantigua-Williams:

Yes, I know I did, and it's the first time. I know. But I've already been using their coconut curling cream for years, so I figured I wasn't gonna miss a chance to try out sister products.

Menendez: *I like the photo you sent me the other day. Your hair looked really good.*

Lantigua-Williams:

And that was just after one shampoo and conditioner. My curls were shiny and smooth, man. And my comb was not full of my own hair after I detangled it in the shower.

Menendez: *Even in pictures, it's coming through. Like your hair looks shiny and hydrated and just so healthy.*

Lantigua-Williams:

Thanks. I really appreciate that you let me send you those, because I'm really excited about the change.

Menendez: *So, how many products are you using all told?*

Lantigua-Williams:

Right now, I've got like four. So, I'm using the shampoo, the conditioner, the leave-in cream, and then can I just tell you what my favorite is?

Menendez: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Lantigua-Williams:

The Wave Whip. First of all, that name is everything, but I love how my waves and my curls just are fuller, they're more touchable, they're less frizzy. I mean, I know I sound like an ad, but let me tell you.

Menendez: *Well, you can enjoy the benefits of the Cantu Beauty haircare line, picking up your favorites at Target or ordering from target.com.*

Menendez: You worked at an organic spa and with a dermatologist. How did those experiences shape your thinking on skin care?

Vargas: I learned a lot about ingredients at the organic spa. I also felt like the stress was more on aromatherapy there than anything else, and it was very hard to clinically help anybody. I also learned I don't like Enya as much as other people may have. And so, me getting a job with a derm was kind of like, "Okay, I'm not gonna do this. Who am I?" And so, working there for the time that I was there was the opposite end of the spectrum. It was somebody who was really passionate about product and beauty, which was great, but where do I fall in this conversation?

I found that I really thought less was more, and I wanted to show people that you don't have to turn to invasive things in order to get your skin to be what you want it to be. And so, that's really how I developed my voice.

Menendez: However, it took you a long time to tell your parents that you were working as an aesthetician and that this is what you were going to do. Why?

Vargas: I think perhaps other people who have immigrant families can relate to this in some way. You know, I'll just speak for myself, and I have found that friends who have had immigrant parents have related to this concept, but really my parents did not send me to school so that I would work with my hands. It's really that cut and dry sometimes for people. My mom definitely knew that aestheticians existed, but I don't think that anybody was happy with that choice and career. They wanted me to be a lawyer or a doctor. Those were pretty much my two choices.

I think that my family would have been proud of me if they could see now what I've accomplished, but definitely it was a hard conversation, and it was many years after that I still had to listen to, "Well, if you had become a lawyer like your brother, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." So, it is what it is. They just had a different world view, and I think one of the gifts that I have in my life is that I'm really good at seeing things from other people's perspectives, even if they're not my own. And I understood what they meant. They just wanted what was best for me. It was very dramatic when I was young, but now I really get it. I really get what they were saying.

Menendez: Was there a point where a light bulb went off over their heads and they said, "Oh, you've built an empire?"

Vargas: You know, unfortunately both my parents passed away really before that came to be. I think that they would have been extremely proud of what I've accomplished, and I'm more sad that my grandmother didn't live to see any of this, because she would have been busting with pride. She was the type of grandma that she saved everybody's little clippings of accomplishments and things. She had a lot of children and a lot of grandchildren, and she was very proud of her family and what she had accomplished in her life. For her, her accomplishment was her family and her grandchildren. And she was really my inspiration for being in the beauty industry. She was the one, every birthday I would get bubble bath, and body lotions, and lip balms from her, and she used to let me do her makeup and her hair all the time with my cousin, so she really is my inspiration.

Menendez: It's so funny. I have two little girls, and so when they were born, Cubans, I don't know if Mexican Americans use this, but Violetas, this perfume that they put on babies, and-

Vargas: Of course. Are you kidding? I thought that that was like it comes with your Latina card when you're born, you must put perfume on your baby.

Menendez: I will let you-

Vargas: Can't believe you asked me that.

Menendez: I will let you in on a secret, which is I only put it on when my dad's coming over, because I don't want to hear about-

Vargas: Oh my God, that's so funny!

Menendez: ... whether or not the babies smell like Violetas, but otherwise I'm just like, "This is a lot of fragrance to put on a child." 2006, you opened your New York salon. Is that right?

Vargas: Yes.

Menendez: You felt that there was a need to modernize skin care, to take a fresh approach to it.

Vargas: Yes.

Menendez: What was missing on the market that you felt there was an opportunity and a need?

Vargas: Well, so my husband and I opened the salon together. We're the dynamic duo. I felt like I... The places that I had worked and places that I hadn't worked, it was a lot of giving the same facial to everybody. It was a lot of one size fits all. I felt that it was very geared towards Anglo skin. I felt like the needs of all were not being met, and I felt like the beauty industry was very exclusionary toward a lot of people, and not like, "Oh, we don't want you

around.” But it was just sort of the imagery, the treatments, the product never felt like it was geared towards people of color and their needs. It just bothered me.

You know, my husband’s from Nicaragua. There’s that part. I felt young when we started the business together, and I wanted to take science to the next level, and I wasn’t seeing that in the industry. In the industry, it was still a lot of glycolic peels on everybody, a lot of what I felt were really outdated product lines geared towards a much older clientele, and what about the working woman? What about the people who are in their late twenties and early thirties? Those are the people that really want to do everything possible for themselves. You’re trying to be everything, go to the gym, go out with your friends, what about treatments for those people? We wanted to create a salon that was for everybody, and we wanted to create, I wanted to do treatments and have a menu that was very geared towards different types of skin and that could be really customized and curated, and really address people in a new way. And that’s what we did.

Menendez: 10 years later you open your LA salon. How did you know it was time to expand?

Vargas: I started going to LA here and there in 2008, when a client would ask. The first client who ever asked me to go to LA was an actress who was in quite a big movie that year and I gave her a facial, and I started going periodically, and then it became more and more, and then it was like once a month. Because I started having regulars. It was more the fatigue of having to stay in a hotel every time, and not having, and having to set up every time, and just knowing that I had clients there that needed me more than I was going, that prompted me. Because I’m always driven by if you want me, I’ll do it for you. If you ask me, I’ll do anything for you.

I wanted clients, you know, not every client is available the four days I go a month to LA, and then one of my aestheticians in New York said she wanted to move back to Los Angeles, and I was like, “Bingo. Let’s do this.” And so, we got a space. It’s just when sort of like all things become aligned and then you go for it and know you can do it.

Menendez: Can I ask, who was the first celebrity to show up at your salon?

Vargas: The first major person that ever walked through my door was Rachel Weisz.

Menendez: So pretty.

Vargas: And so nice, and just really... She and I are the same age, and we have boys the same age, so we really bonded immediately, and her skin in that era didn’t always love making movies as much as she did, and so she came for facials regularly. The other actress that was coming regularly at that time was Tatum O’Neal, who was on Sex and the City at the time. She also is one of the kindest people I know. Every time Tatum came to the salon, she would buy five gift cards to give to friends and to give to people, so that I would get my name out there. And the two of them were very, very kind with me, and as with everybody, if you give them a good enough treatment, they’ll tell their besties and will tell other people, so that’s really how we grew the company.

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Menendez: 2011, you launched your own product line. What was the motivation behind launching that? I feel like so many folks I think think about this, and it's helpful to know how you did it.

Vargas: I wanted to do it because I wanted to... I kept on looking for an exceptional line to work with, and not that there weren't great lines out there, it just wasn't exactly what I wanted. And so, I started working on it back in... I think I started in 2007 or 2008 on my first product. I didn't launch the line until 2011, when I had four products. My first product was the daily serum. It took me two years to do. It was the hardest I've ever worked on anything, but it's still to this day, it's my top-selling product worldwide.

Menendez: Because what, you go to like a biochemist with a vision for this? Who are you working with to develop this product?

Vargas: Yeah, you go to a cosmetic chemist. You have to interview them, like everybody else, and you have to find a place that you want to work with to make things for you. My husband and I found a lab that we really liked. We liked the ingredients that they were working with, we liked the setup, it was a really nice company and I loved the chemist. We're friends to this day. I told him what I wanted to make, and he thought I was nuts, because nobody had made anything like it before. This green juice for the skin. He thought it was weird. And it took a long time to get it right, because I wanted it to be hydrating but light, oxygenating, all these things. But it really worked. It's a beloved product. Anybody who's a fan of the line uses that product, and I'm very proud of it.

After that I got the hang of how to do it, and I learned a lot along the way, and product development is very easy for me now.

Menendez: So, what do you know now about product development that you wish you knew when you started?

Vargas: I think what I didn't understand is that it's just like baking a cake from scratch, you know? It's not enough to just know you want hyaluronic acid in your serum. You have to know how much of it to put, and how it will react under makeup, and how could you put a sunscreen on top, and there is something like that for every single ingredient. Not all ingredients work for all skin types. And I understood a lot about ingredients because of the derm I used to work for, because I had to learn about all these different product lines, but it wasn't enough, what I knew, and so it was sort of like going to chemistry college, you know?

Menendez: Your feelings on plastic surgery?

Vargas: You know, honest to God, if it's gonna make you feel better about yourself, then go for it. But I want people to know you don't have to do it in order to look your best. That's all. It's that simple. I don't judge anybody for anything, and certainly same thing with filler, Botox, all of it. If you are gonna walk out of that appointment being so happy, then I'm happy for you. But I want you to know that there's plenty of stuff that I can do with you, so you don't have to do it. If it's against what you want to do for yourself, I got you. I have your back.

Menendez: Has the current crisis changed the way you're approaching your business or the way that you're thinking about your business?

Vargas: Well, look. Both of my salons are closed. They've been closed for a month or more, and that's very tough for us. We are doing online consultations in the meantime. You can book one with an aesthetician, and the money that you pay for the consultation you can use as credit toward products or towards treatments when we reopen. We are selling gift cards on our website. You spend \$75, you get a \$100 gift card for when we do reopen. You know, we're... You have to pivot. My husband and I, this is our family business. This is what we've built. Many of our employees are like family to us. Most of them have been with us for a very, very long time, so we want to take care of everybody.

What he and I both know is that we are willing to work our hardest for our employees, for our clients, and that we'll get through this. So yeah, so we've had to be thoughtful about how we were going to keep things together and keep the group together. We have a newsletter that we send out to the staff every week. It's called The Good Newsletter.

Menendez: And it's so hard not knowing how long this is all gonna be. It seems to me that so much of your ethos is really about empowerment, right? That like if a woman feels beautiful, that is a form of empowerment. So much of your ethos around natural beauty, about having an alternative to invasive procedures. Did you always feel comfortable in your own skin?

Vargas: God, no. God, no! No. First of all, I think an eye-opening thing for me when I became an aesthetician was learning that everybody felt insecure. No matter who the person is, she could have just won an Oscar, and she has the same insecurities that I do, or you do, and that was eye opening. It was also eye opening to learn... When I was in high school, I would look at magazines, and I would just be like, "Gee, I can never be like that girl." And now I know half of it is smoke and mirrors and the other half is work ethic, and those women take it upon themselves to go to the gym every day, because they think it's part of their job to look like a movie star. You know?

Because I've listened to so many people and I've tried to address their insecurities with them so much, it has really helped me come out of my head so much and realize it's not gonna help my... I have to be a leader to... We have 70 employees. Most of them are much younger women. If I'm not at my best, how could I possibly lead them, or how could I be a

good boss, or how could I be a good face of the brand or voice of the brand if I'm unleashing my insecurities onto the world? How could I be a good mother to my daughter if I'm showing her that? I'm not saying I'm showing my daughter perfection. That's not what I mean. But I just mean like I, if I feel insecure about something, I either shut it off, get out of my head, or I do something about it.

If I'm not happy with my body, I go work out. If I don't feel good about the way I look, I don't eat dessert with my kids every night or whatever. I've gotten better at editing out the behaviors that I know won't make me feel happy about myself.

Menendez: I love that. Joanna, thank you so much for your time. Thank you for making this all work.

Vargas: Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. Manuela Bedoya is our intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the quickest and easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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