



Why Cuyana's Karla Gallardo Believes in Fewer, Better Things

The CEO and co-founder of the global e-commerce company shares how her upbringing in Ecuador shaped her approach to consumption, the skills she cultivated before diving into entrepreneurship, and how you set boundaries when you're both a hustler and your own boss.

Alicia Menendez: What would happen if we all consumed fewer, better things? That question is the driving force behind Karla Gallardo's company, Cuyana. You have likely seen their beautiful leather goods, their silk dresses and cashmere sweaters. This is a story of how Karla's vision came to life, a carefully calculated steps she took to prepare herself to run a global direct-to-consumer E-commerce business, and the surprising challenge that she, a self-proclaimed perfectionist and hustler, did not anticipate. Karla, thanks for doing this.

Karla Gallardo: Hi, thank you.

Menendez: Karla, you say growing up in Ecuador was a life of fewer, better things. How did that show up in the way that you were raised?

Gallardo: I would say, primarily, in the objects that we purchased and how long we made them last. Ecuador, itself, is a country where there's just the spirit realities in terms of financial statuses, and most of the population lives below the poverty line. That still instills a way of living, at least when I grew up, that even if you could afford to go to school and you could afford proper meals and a uniform, you still were careful in how you spent? Just from a supply standpoint, there wasn't a lot of excess going on around us. We were just very mindful, and food never went to waste in our home, never. My dad and my mom, they went to the German School in Ecuador and there was European influence on their education.

Gallardo: My dad, he just had a very European mindset when it came to investing in nicer things, but fewer things. That's how we went about purchasing things for our house and our day-to-day. As a teenager, that was sometimes not the ideal or the thing that I actually cared about, right. While my friends were wearing flared pants and for me, my dad just want to go with the classics that would last for many years.

Menendez: It's funny because, like all things, however you grow up is sort of how you just figure everybody else is growing up until, all of a sudden, you hit an impasse where you realize that is not the case. For you though, it really is coming to college in the United States where you're like, "Oh, you guys have a culturally different understanding of consumption."

Gallardo: Yes. Completely different. Yes. Everything from, yeah, the dining hall, the crazy amounts of food everywhere and every type of cereal possible, and going to the mall was the best thing ever. It was just so many stores and so many sales that made things feel like it was worth the purchase. Because we were raised in such a specific way, there was also a lot of trust in how we carried our own finances. By we, me and my sister, and my dad gave her

and I a credit card since we were, I think 15 or 16. I mean, we never dared to buy anything without his permission. It was just really for emergencies or whatever we needed during high school.

Gallardo: Then I took that same credit card to college and my dad never changed the agreement. It was a credit card for me. There were no rules around that. We just behaved a certain way with that credit card, and I went crazy the first couple of times I went to the mall and purchased quite a few things and went back to my dorm. Then the next day my dad called, and he was like, "What is going on with your credit card activity? What did you buy?" I was incredibly ashamed because there wasn't anything that I was actually super excited or proud to share in terms of the purchases I had made. That was the first, very shocking moment for me, which was just like, "Wow." It was just very easy to switch my mindset given how much stuff was around me and how normal it seemed.

Menendez: You were obsessive. You grew up sort of obsessive with numbers, and it seemed pretty clear pretty early that you were going to be a math kid. Was there anything your parents were doing to cultivate that in you to encourage that?

Gallardo: Oh, yes. Math was one of the most important subjects to be good at at home. My dad was very good at it. He always told us that numbers were the foundation to everything. My mom was a chemist, so it was very, more a scientific approach to how our education was designed. Numbers and biology and all of the sciences, we were really, really good at them. I think partly feeling that I was good at it made me want to pursue a stronger education in that, in those fields. For me, just math, there was always a right answer, and I like that. I like the certainty of it's either right or wrong. Yeah, there was also the almost children of parents from Latin America or any other countries and just the push for pursuing, eventually, a career in finance or become a doctor one day.

Menendez: I think about you being a woman, Latina, immigrant at an Ivy League school majoring in applied mathematics, and I don't think the question is, did you experience bias? The question is, when and how do you first remember experiencing bias?

Gallardo: In most classes, me and my now very good friend Charlotte, we were the only two women in the class, and the classes were pretty large. All males and the two of us, and I don't think we saw it as something intimidating, if that's what your question is? It was mostly the reason for that is just how my dad raised my sister and I. We never saw being female or a woman as something weakening or something that we had to fight hard to stand out or be better. It was just, your superpower is being female. It was like, "Oh, yeah. We're the only two girls in the class, but so what? Kind of cool, it's kind of cool." The same thing happened later when I worked at Goldman Sachs. We sat on the trading floor. It was mostly male and very few women, but I didn't feel less. Now, fast forward to today, all the things I've learned, the friends I've made and the experiencing I've heard and what I've seen and how many times, the amount of disadvantage that, as a woman, many times you have to confront. Now, I look back and I'm just so glad I didn't know any of that back then.

Menendez: I also think about you being at Goldman and realizing you can trade bonds, but you have no idea how to start a business. I think that is a pretty common early twenties experience where you realize, yes, you have been building skills. You have learned about numbers and making a business case, but you don't... There's connective tissue that is missing to launch you into the next thing it is that you want to do. How did you make up for that gap?

Gallardo: Oh, yeah. I think that's back then, it goes back to my Latin American roots and growing in a more conservative country where from one day to the other, your savings can be wiped because the banks go through chaos. From one day to the other, you can lose everything. The whole country can be in complete chaos. We always lived very cautiously and it was really tough because in terms of how do I make this even happen? I always wanted to build something or start something. I had the idea of Cuyana back when I was sitting at the Goldman Sachs offices. The stories of new entrepreneurs were starting to happen. But for me, from where I came from, where I was sitting was incredibly successful already, and how dare could I give that up to go and start something that may not become anything? Then what, right? All the effort that my parents put in me when I was in Ecuador. The incredible fortune I had to be one of the few people that has the education that I have coming from Ecuador, and then ending up in an Ivy league school and working myself through college. All of that would've felt like wasted effort.

Gallardo: The idea of just quitting and starting a company just wasn't even an option for me because of all those reasons, right. For me, it was just taking steps that if that new step didn't work out, I could revert and go back to the previous, right, so I wouldn't just give a lot up. For me it meant, well, first going to get an MBA. If during the MBA, then I decided, okay, actually I don't think I should start this company, I could always go back to Goldman afterwards, and I would've just gained two years of education. I got my MBA at Stanford and it was time to graduate, but I still felt I wasn't ready. I had now a degree, I had a network, but I'd never worked anywhere else but Goldman. Cuyana was meant to start as an online store. I've never been close to that, so I decided to get a job first and then somewhat of an online store experience and gain a skillset there and understanding, how do you even run an online store? There was this awesome job at Apple that would allow me to learn and do that, and so I ended up going to apple for a year.

Gallardo: It was only after that that I said, "Okay, now I'm ready. I can do this." Then I started Cuyana, but that took about, from the moment where I felt it's time, to the moment where I actually started Cuyana, it was four years. Because it took a year to apply to business school, then a couple years in business school, and then one more year working.

Menendez: Let's talk about the vision for Cuyana, a global design house that inspires intentional buying through pieces that are crafted with integrity. What steps did you take to get to the articulation of that vision?

Gallardo: The hardest thing about that vision statement is that there's so much that we are doing at Cuyana that simplifying it to just that was very hard. That's why each word is very loaded.

Menendez: Why make it global?

Gallardo: Oh, because staying local isn't enough. I mean, we want to make an impact in the world. The cool thing about Cuyana is that we make products around the world, and so the vision is to eventually make all those accessible to the whole world. How cool is it that if you live in Italy, eventually you can get the best baby alpaca scarf made in Peru. We are impacting the lives of the workers in all of these countries, right. All these factories, many of them have rebuilt through us because we're bringing back traditional craft, so we've made impact at that level. But then also going back to making impact at the consumer level, as the company continues to grow and how the customer buys, really influencing the intentionality behind their purchases and making them live a better life. It's kind of a full circle

Latina to Latina: Why Cuyana's Karla Gallardo Believes in Fewer, Better Things

Menendez: For Cuyana specifically, what does it mean that pieces are crafted with integrity?

Gallardo: There are many ways in which integrity can be improved in the retail industry. One of the places where we realized that being able to buy a product intentionally, if the product isn't made with integrity, then it's really hard to make that choice as a customer, right? We add integrity to every single step of that journey. Being able to be transparent with the information, making the right choices along the way. The safest choices for the planet, the safest choices for our customer. The best quality, and being very honest about what the product is made of, and honest prices, as well.

Menendez: I was about to say, and doing all of this and making money at the end of it.

Gallardo: Exactly.

Menendez: Because, given the amount of mission that is baked into what you have built, you could easily run this as a nonprofit, right?

Gallardo: Oh, yeah.

Menendez: Given that there's so much, you're focused on the environment, that you're focused on the workers behind the products, that's one model. The other model is you do everything with integrity and still manage to turn a profit.

Gallardo: Exactly. That's the big white space that existed before Cuyana, and figuring out how to do both is, I think, what we are really great at.

Menendez: What is the biggest obstacle you ran into in that endeavor?

Gallardo: What I would say has been our hardest obstacle, and I have a co-founder, Shilpa, also didn't come from fashion or retail, is exactly that. Not coming from retail and having a network in retail has been actually a super power and our secret tool for redesigning how product should be made and sold. Because we just didn't have that bias, so it's been amazing. But then when it comes to putting the product to market and having a lot of the right voices talk about it and build that awareness, that has been our biggest challenge because we simply did not have the network. Editors writing about Cuyana, the right celebrities wearing Cuyana, the right influencers, all of that we've built from the ground up.

Gallardo: I mean, we didn't know a single person in the industry, right. I came from banking. Shilpa, my co-founder, she is a UX designer. She comes from the tech side and it's just, we knew zero people. In 10 years we've gone from not knowing anyone to now, actually having a very strong network and the right voices talking about Cuyana, but it wasn't easy. I think all the other aspects of growing and building the business were, in a way, like a math problem, whereas building the network wasn't.

Menendez: What does sustainable fashion look like for someone who cannot afford your products?

Gallardo: Well, I always say you don't need to buy new to be able to buy sustainable products. We will be creating that, as well, for the Cuyana customer soon. Part of Cuyana's mission is to remove clutter from your closet, but also from the world. Removing clutter means, for us, not letting our product end up in landfill, so we do everything. That's our ultimate mission for sustainability, prevent our product from ending up in landfill. How do we do that? Well, we design products that will last for so many years, right, that don't go out of trend. The design is made for it to last. The quality allows the product to last.

Gallardo: We haven't talked about this. This is a big thing in my home, but mending product. Taking your purse for a leather spa moment. You can let leather products to nourish the leather so it lasts longer. There are ways of prolonging the life of that product. Then at some point, you're going to be done with your product and that is totally okay, right. But there's

Latina to Latina: Why Cuyana's Karla Gallardo Believes in Fewer, Better Things

somebody who may want to use that product, and who can use that product because that product's made with such great quality that it can have a second, third, fourth life. The ability for us to create the space for those transfers to happen is the next step for us and that just allows our product to not end up in landfill and really achieve this mission.

Menendez: Karla, when you are your own boss, as you are, how do you create boundaries so that you're not just working all day?

Gallardo: That's been the hardest. I couldn't, I mean at the beginning of the company, it was impossible. I now balance, not because it's my choice anymore. I have two sons now and if it weren't for them, I would have the problem of just working 24/7. But since my first son was born, it was very hard transition for me too, because I actually, part of being a perfectionist is "Wow, I need to be perfect at work and also become a perfect mother."

Gallardo: That was really hard to realize, "Well now I have two roles in life and I won't be able to do both perfect," but it took me a while to get there. So, finding that balance or whatever we call it, right? How do you divide yourself up to do both, was the hardest.

Menendez: This idea of fewer, better I find very resonant in the way of product and consumption, but I actually think it's a way one can lead their lives as well, and I wonder where else in your life you have applied the ethos of fewer, better?

Gallardo: Oh, my gosh, definitely. Fewer, better, I know we've talked a lot about just the material things, but it's definitely a way of living life. I think COVID helped the world make a shift or reset a little bit in terms of fewer, better relationships, for example, is one of the big themes, right. Really, how are you spending your time? Who are you spending your time with? Fewer, better travel. Really, are all those work trips necessary, right? There's just fewer, better in so many ways, and I think the highlight is just how to live an intentional life? Where most of the things you're doing you've thought through, right? You're using your time intentionally. Time is the ultimate luxury, that's what we believe in Cuyana. How you use that in a fewer, better way is really what will bring you your deepest satisfaction. That said, it can become very stressful to just, "Oh, am I being, right?" It's a very high standard. I think it's just in the little things and having just moments that make you feel fulfilled, or just being present with your kids for 20 minutes. Those 20 minutes that they will make the whole day, right, so much better than if you just tried so hard to take them out of the house for two hours in the chaotic way, right. It feels terrible.

Gallardo: No, really, right, as opposed to just staying in the house for 20 minutes and playing an awesome game with them, those are the memory building moments that can be just short. But yeah, it's just more intentional. It's not about quantity. It goes back to, it's not quantity. It's more quality, and having your moments during the day or during your week that just feel intentional and bring you fulfillment and being happy with that. You cannot live like that 24 hours a day.

Menendez: Karla, I am such a fan. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Gallardo: Thank you. I really appreciate your time, as well, and it was fun.

Menendez: Thank you, as always, for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMS on Instagram. Tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, Latinatolatina.com/shop, and remember, please subscribe or follow Latina to Latina: Why Cuyana's Karla Gallardo Believes in Fewer, Better Things

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