

TRADE WITH A TWIST

Aboriginal women are launching ventures—some in surprising fields—that are as successful beyond Canada's borders as they are at home.

When Ellen Melcosky set out nine years ago to sell preserved wild Pacific salmon, she began with her mother's traditional Esketemc First Nation recipe, then added her own touch. Living in the wine country of British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, she incorporated dry white wine into the brining formula. Steaming the marinated salmon and sealing it in foil pouches gave it a shelf life of up to five years, ideal for the export market.

Financing for her new company, Little Miss Chief, came from family and friends. "No financial institutions would consider a loan for a woman with no financial background," she recalls. CESO Aboriginal Services, a non-profit organization that aids Aboriginal start-ups, helped develop a business plan.

The combination of her unique product and aggressive marketing worked. Within a year, the company was selling salmon across Canada and in the U.S. and Spain, and today more than 15 percent of sales are exports.

In another twist on tradition, Dene Fur Clouds, a company in Fort Providence, Northwest Territories, combines practicality with style and Aboriginal motifs, making mitts, headbands, hats and other women's and men's clothing out of fur from the Arctic, woven into washable wool. The company attracted worldwide attention at Toronto Fashion Week last spring and is aiming at a high-end

market: the après-ski crowd in Canada, the U.S. and Europe, "people who want practical and fashionable items that are traditional, not high-tech," explains President Judy Magrum. "There seems to be an appreciation of the Aboriginal culture and mindset behind our products."

Another Aboriginal woman doing well in fashion circles abroad is Pam Baker of North Vancouver, B.C. Her company, Touch of Culture Legends, exports 40 percent of its sportswear and ready-to-wear fashions, featuring northwest coast motifs and artwork that are unmistakably Aboriginal in inspiration.

Women Aboriginal entrepreneurs in Canada are also exporting products that go far beyond the traditional. SMS Plastics & Custom Molding of Crossfield, Alberta, makes plastic products that include water treatment systems for use in Third World countries, where they are "filling a real need for affordable, clean water," says company president Joanne Penner. Penner has taken exporting to a whole new level by establishing a manufacturing facility in Bangladesh.

In the high-tech world of video and film production, Aboriginal actors Jennifer Podemski and Laura Milliken launched Big Soul Productions in 1999 to produce film, video and television programs. Their *Moccasin Flats*, a dramatic television series starring Aboriginal actors and set



Photo: courtesy of Aboriginal Business Canada/Industry Canada

Joanne Penner of Crossfield, Alberta: Exporting products that go far beyond the traditional.

in an Aboriginal ghetto in Regina, is in its second season.

Podemski took the series to the Sundance and Cannes film festivals, where its gritty style and global outlook led to a sale to New Zealand and interest from other countries.

"*Moccasin Flats* is all about Aboriginal life, but suddenly we're finding it appeals to a much broader audience," she says—an important breakthrough for Aboriginal exports. "We, as Aboriginal people, can produce a marketable product without having to sell out." 🍁

See *Journey to Success*, a new guide for Aboriginal women thinking of going into business, at www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ps/ecd/js/journ_e.html.

Read the latest news on Aboriginal business in the November issue of *CanadExport*, International Trade Canada's biweekly investment and trade publication. See the issue and search the *CanadExport* archives at www.canadexport.gc.ca.