

Spotlight On:

Valerie Song | CEO and Co-founder

AVA Technologies Inc., Est. 2016

When Valerie asked her three-year old niece where the tomatoes on her pizza came from and she said “grocery stores,” Valerie knew young people were in danger of becoming even more disconnected to their food. A business graduate from UBC’s Sauder School of Business, Valerie worked in the organic food marketing industry, her first foray into gardening and knowing where good food comes from - it’s also where she found inspiration in the company’s motto: “Leave the Earth better than you found it.”

AVA Technologies Inc., launched by Valerie and co-founder Chase Ando, is a budding start-up from Vancouver trying to help people eat better while reducing food miles. AVA (Automated Vertical Agriculture) creates smart home products starting with AVA Byte - think Nespresso machine for gardening. By using modern technology, AVA wants to help the world get growing by unlocking access to the freshest, organic ingredients at home, all year round.

- What was the motivation behind starting your own business?

When working in organic foods, it really stuck with me to invest more time to learn about where food comes from and how to grow it. That being said, living in an apartment in Vancouver with limited space, the only gardening I could do at the time was in the company garden or community gardens, which are often torn down by new condo developments. It made me really think about what choices the next generation have to get in touch with nature.

- Who inspired you to become an entrepreneur?

A turn-key moment was when I was working for a beer company. During a sales session one day, I asked a business owner when he knew that he wanted to be an entrepreneur. He told me it was when he started losing productivity at work and didn’t enjoy it anymore, he knew he could do more. It really jogged something inside of me. A few weeks later I quit my job to start AVA.

- Who is your role model?

With both my parents running different parts of their company, I gained a lot of respect for my parents. It doesn’t matter if you are a man or woman if you have the hustle, the skill and the willingness to learn then you can do anything.

- How has mentorship or networking played a role in where you are today?

Mentorship is so important in everything that we do. From an official standpoint, it is crucial to have a board of advisors, but it is also valuable to learn from personal mentors and peers that are founders of

their own companies. Every mentor has helped walk me through a different challenge and has given me different perspectives, which has proven to be super helpful when you get stuck.

- What do you see as your greatest accomplishment to date?

The greatest and also the toughest accomplishment to date with AVA would have to be our fundraising. It's something that we are very proud of and worked really hard to get there. In June, we raised our \$2M USD round through a local venture capital firm. We had to push through and get over the fear of not getting investment and be bold to ask for what we needed. We pitched for \$1M, and they offered us \$2M - that has been the proudest moment to date.

- What has been your biggest lesson learned about being your own boss?

So many! I think one of the biggest lessons learned is that being your own boss is different from how they portray it in the movies, as movies are often overly glamorized. It doesn't really happen just like that, it is a lot of what I call making your own luck. You really have to go out and pursue those opportunities – they don't just fall in your lap like the typical blockbuster movie. I had to learn how to create opportunities for myself and the business. Another big thing I had to learn was that when you think it is time to give up but you keep pushing past, you will usually find a breakthrough. If you have that spirit to keep going and pushing through, and you really have done your homework on your business, then good things can happen.

- What has been your greatest reward to date as a small business in the tech-agricultural (agtech company) sector/industry?

Something that was really gratifying to us when we first launched our crowdfunding campaign last year was that we got a lot of supportive comments from backers. One came from a woman who was disabled and always wanted to garden, but couldn't. So when she saw that our product was easily accessible and could be small enough to fit on a countertop, it eased her mind in terms of being super simple and not a lot of maintenance and that she could still enjoy gardening. That was a cool moment.

- What unique challenges have you faced as a small business trying to commercialize new innovative products and how have you overcome them?

The hardest part, especially if you are a first time founder, is just figuring out how everything works when you are mass producing. We had a misconception that all we had to do was build the prototype and then the factory would take that and make the product, but then we realized we had to do that all. Suppliers, logistics, packaging, there was a lot that we didn't know about. Our advisors and peer mentors were really helpful resources – they told us who we needed to talk to, helped us eliminate a lot of our challenges, and gave us a focused place to start. You will find a lot of people willing to help one another, don't be afraid to take the risk to reach out and ask for advice as they may become one of your best advisors.

- Looking back, what advice would you give to other aspiring young female entrepreneurs from your experience?

The best thing you can do for yourself is to just go do it, practice and surround yourself with people who can support you in getting there. You need to create your own opportunities. Don't just wait for them to come to you.

- Your motto is?

For the company our motto is "Let's Grow". Of course the pun is intended, and it's also about how we encourage people to go get what they want and to keep growing personally – invest in yourself but also as a team and ultimately you have a bigger and better harvest at the end.

- Tell us a little known fact about your company.

AVA was named after the AI robot from the movie Ex Machina.

- Where is your favourite B.C. destination?

I recently did a hike at Joffre Lakes near Squamish, BC which was just breathtaking with the pristine water and the views. When I got to the top, I held out my hand with some of my trail mix and birds came down to eat them. That was really my Disney Princess moment right there, it was amazing.

The Bottom Line:

- AVA employs 7 full time employees
- 2018 Small Business BC Award Winner - Best Innovation Award
- AVA Byte is currently in production, with pre-purchased orders to ship later this year and the next batch will be available in store and online in Canada and the US.
- AVA looks to expand globally – U.S.A, Asia, EU and UK