

BLUEBERRY FIELDS OFFER A BROAD HORIZON

for Kosovan agriculture and veterinary sciences graduate



European Training Foundation

It may not sound like a graduate position, but Verina is no ordinary product of a university education – she has a degree in plant production and, at 25, is already in a management position as a quality control agronomist at Pristina's Sante Fruit blueberry farm.

Like many well-qualified young Kosovans, Verina has had job offers from larger, multinational companies – often from EU based firms – but is confident that at this stage in her career, she is getting a wealth of experience and opportunity by staying local.

'When I started working at Sante Fruit, I did not have a lot of practical knowledge – more theoretical – but the owners of the company have been very supportive, allowing me to express my ideas and combine work and study,' Verina says.

'They have sent me on a lot of training courses, which they pay for. It has given me confidence in developing my career in Kosovo.'

In high season Verina works long days at the company's 10-hectare blueberry farm 40km from Pristina, but the experience she is getting will stand her in good stead for senior positions at a later stage in her career.

Verina, who talked to the European Training Foundation in September at the Turin launch conference of its new four-year (2022-2025) project 'Skilling Up the Western Balkan agri-food sector: digitalising, greening,' was fortunate in finding the right kind of support soon after she graduated.

One of her neighbours in Pristina was Fatmir Selimi – a senior official at USAID working on agricultural programmes, who advised her to apply for a paid, six-month internship at the donor organisation.

'Since 2012, we have had 400 trainees and more than 100 internships at USAID,' Fatmir says. Most, like Verina, have continued their studies and got jobs in companies, government or

taken positions in national associations.

'I brought Verina in – particularly since female agronomists are rare in Kosovo. When one of our strategic partners, Sante Fruit, asked for recommendations, Verina was the best candidate of several I put forward. She is a great example of how women can work in management in agriculture.'

'Agriculture is not about sitting in an office,' Fatmir adds. 'When you work in the sector it is literally fieldwork that gives you an edge in business.'

'Verina now has four or five years of practical experience, and I believe she will be an excellent manager in the future to further develop agriculture in Kosovo.'

Verina is an example of how companies can take advantage of what are known as performance-enhancing skills in employees: such is her enthusiasm for blueberry farming, that she is actively developing methods for increasing the shelf life of the company's product.

'I started research into this question this year and shall carry that through to next year in order to measure as many parameters of blueberries as possible, with the view of having final results to increase the shelf life of blueberries. My colleagues at work are helping me on daily basis to implement together this experiment,' she says.

Currently, from the field to cold storage blueberries have a maximise shelf-life of four to five weeks – although the fruit begins to soften after three weeks.

'If you want to export to Europe, you have only two or three days to pack and despatch,' Verina notes. 'I am trying to keep blueberries in cold storage and add one more week to the market life.'

Fatmir notes that 'it is very rare and unusual to give such a young person a management position; what Sante Fruit has done is very special.'

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Verina agrees: 'The company is run by a core group of seven people – young guys who are very supportive, understand climate change and want to digitalise.'

With an annual turnover of around €400,000 and 10% of Kosovo's blueberry market, the company – which employs 100 casual pickers during picking season – exports 95% of its product.

'When you work with passion and love your work that is what matters,' Verina adds. 'I am still open to new offers – but for the moment I am really enjoying the opportunities I have.'