

Overview: The Olympic Cellars Story

How It All Began

In 1979, a retired grape-grower from California, Gene Neuharth, opened the Neuharth Winery in Sequim, a small town on Washington's picturesque Olympic Peninsula. It was one of the first 15 wineries in the state, and the first on the peninsula. The winery became known for its fine dinner wines, such as Chardonnay & Merlot. When Neuharth passed away in 1993, his assistant winemaker, Dan Caudill, took over the winery and changed its name to Olympic Cellars.

A highway bypass project around Sequim led Caudill to move the winery to a new location, a century-old dairy barn alongside the main peninsula highway, State Route 101, between Sequim and Port Angeles.

At the time, a small group of investors, including Texas Instruments Executive Kathy Charlton and her husband, Ralph, owned the barn and land. Caudill brought the owners a proposal to convert the barn into a winery. The first step, bringing the structure up to code, required *major* renovations. The owners agreed to help finance the renovation project, which was completed in two years. In 1998, Olympic Cellars became the revived barn's new occupant. Despite the new location, the winery ran into financial problems.

Current Ownership

Ralph and Kathy Charlton and Ron & Mary Freytag stepped in to buy the winery from Caudill in 1999. They took over operations while still living in Dallas. Ralph & Ron kept the business going, working part-time on site. Then in 2001, Kathy, a human resources executive, took early retirement from Texas Instruments after 25 years. The Charltons packed their bags and headed for their new home and now fully-owned winery on the Olympic Peninsula.

A New Direction

Olympic Cellars became officially woman-owned and operated under Kathy's leadership in January 2002, freeing Ralph to turn his attention back to his own marketing business. Sara Gagnon had stayed on as winemaker throughout the change in ownership, and together she and Kathy started taking the winery in a new direction. Molly Rivard came aboard to manage the retail shop, and locals affectionately began referring to the dynamic trio as the "Olympic Women in Wine."

Then one day while researching women and wine on the Internet, Kathy came across the website of Texas artist Kathy Womack. Womack had painted a "Women in Wine™" series. One of the paintings portrayed three women, obviously old friends, all dressed-up in their "going out" clothes, laughing and enjoying each other's company over a glass of wine. Other paintings in the series depicted multigenerational scenes of women gathering over wine in celebration of family and friendship. These images struck Kathy as embodying the spirit and future of Olympic Cellars. She commissioned Womack to create another painting depicting the three founders of the "new" Olympic Cellars, and this image became the label for the *La Dolce Vida* line.

Knowing that wine tasting can be intimidating for some, Kathy was determined that Olympic Cellars would be a fun, friendly “open doors” kind of place, where visitors could feel comfortable regardless of where they are in their “wine journey.” Her overriding philosophy is that wine should be *enjoyed*, and visitors are encouraged to slow down, enjoy some good conversation and the company of friends, and celebrate the simple pleasures. Olympic Cellars crafts wines for every palate, from dry to sweet and white to red, and visitors are invited to drink what they like. There’s no right or wrong choice at Olympic Cellars – it’s all about what appeals to one’s personal palate.

The winery has continued to reinvent itself over the past four years. Sara Gagnon moved on in the summer of 2004, focusing more time on her second love – kayaking – and the kayak tour company she co-owns. In early 2006, she opened her own winery in Port Angeles. Libby Sweetser joined the Olympic Women in Wine in 2003 as the winery’s events coordinator, and has proven an invaluable member of the team.

Kathy’s search for a new winemaker brought a European influence to Olympic Cellars in the person of Benoit Murat. Currently the “only rooster in the hen house,” Benoit hails from Toulouse, France and brings a wealth of vineyard and managerial experience from the old country. Beginning his career working the vineyards of Saint-Emilion, a medieval town in the Bordeaux region of France, Benoit went on to earn a diploma at La Tour Blanche School of Viticulture and Enology, located south of Bordeaux in the heart of the Sauternes Appellation. He worked for several wineries in the Bordeaux and Languedoc areas before traveling to the U.S. to experience winemaking in a different part of the world. His interest in Washington’s perfect climate for growing grapes and expanding reputation of premium wines eventually led him to cross paths with Kathy Charlton.

Wines for the Drinking

Given his balanced background in the vineyard and in wineries, Benoit began his tenure at Olympic Cellars with a review of each aspect of production from grape contracts to equipment to cooperage. A comprehensive list of improvements were initiated in 2005 and continue ongoing. These changes coupled with Benoit’s talent and winemaking style, a *mélange* of French and American winemaking techniques, ripe fruit, and good concentration, are earning the attention of judges and consumers alike. Olympic Cellars’ 2004 *Dungeness Red*, Benoit’s debut Lemberger wine, received the esteemed Jefferson Cup award at the 2005 Jefferson Cup Invitational, honoring the “best of the best” among U.S. wineries from all of America’s wine regions.

Brands

Olympic Cellars’ premium *La Dolce Vida* brand features five varietals. These limited production awarding winning wines are intended to be shared with friends and family in celebration of “the good life.”

Dungeness is Olympic Cellars’ heritage label. *Dungeness Red* and *Dungeness White* were originally released in the late 1970’s by Gene Neuharth, the winery’s founder. The Olympic Women in Wine have updated the brand’s look with artist series labeling.

The *Working Girl*[®] series of everyday wines, Working Girl White, Go Girl Red, and Rosé the Riveter, are distinct, affordable and intended for sharing with friends and colleagues after a long day. *Created* by women *in support of* women, the wines underwrite Olympic Cellars' commitment to philanthropic giving, which originated with a women's health clinic in Port Angeles and has expanded with the nationwide rollout of *Working Girl* wines.

On Marketing Wine to Women

The *Working Girl* wine labels are designed to reflect the backgrounds and personalities of each of Olympic Cellars' female owner/operators. In some instances, however, the labels have caused the media to misguidedly associate the wines with other brands that stereotype and patronize female consumers. For the record, *Working Girl* wines were launched as Olympic Cellars' fun-loving second label in 2003, long before the industry's female marketing frenzy took hold. Economics, consumer demand and the winery's triple bottom line philosophy drove the brand's creation. From the beginning, the wines have directly supported women and families through Olympic Cellars' two signature philanthropic programs, *Charity of Choice* and *2X Success*, and the network of giving continues to grow.

As women, Olympic Cellars' owner/operators do not appreciate patronizing "girly" marketing strategies. Olympic Cellars has never been part of that and never will be!

Handyman Red

A fourth wine in the *Working Girl* series – Handyman Red – was released in early 2005 and dedicated to "all the men in our lives who have worked at the winery and bailed us out of many a mechanical difficulty." – Kathy Charlton.

Wine for the Soul

Whoever coined the phrase, "laughter is wine for the soul," likely did so after attending an Olympic Cellars event! The winery's ongoing list of wacky antics range from reenactments of the classic "Grape Stomping" and "Chocolate Factory" episodes of the I Love Lucy Show, to a Rosie the Riveter-style tire changing competition supporting a girls' camp for non-traditional career exploration, to hosting Port Angeles' annual Valentines "Most Romantic Man/Woman" Contest. In March 2006 Olympic Cellars' helped to spearhead a tri-city celebration of International Women's Day on the Olympic Peninsula, commemorating the "extraordinary work of ordinary women." Establishing a sense of community is an integral part of Olympic Cellars' business philosophy, and whatever the event, Olympic Cellars touches hearts through laughter and reflection and keeps 'em coming back for more!

Beyond Wine and Celebration – The Triple Bottom Line

Olympic Cellars' business goal is to operate profitably while also giving back to the community and being sensitive to environmental concerns. The winery has launched several programs to meet this goal.

Improving Society through Charitable Giving and Sustainable Community Partnership – Charity of Choice & 2X Success Programs

When Kathy took the reins at Olympic Cellars, the winery was receiving multiple donation requests each week from charitable organizations. She honored these requests with donations of a few bottles of wine, always feeling that she wanted to do more but was limited by the small size of her venture. Eventually the Olympic Women decided *focus* was the key to making their desired impact.

In 2003, Olympic Cellars designated the local Gynocare Program its “Charity of Choice.” Gynocare provides free diagnostic testing and treatment for low-income women on the Olympic Peninsula, who are at risk for ovarian cancer and other diseases. Kathy established a direct line of funding for Gynocare, donating two percent of monthly profits from sales of all Working Girl wines, plus \$1.00 for every Working Girl branded t-shirt sold in the winery gift shop.

Evolution to Partnership for Mutual Success

Olympic Cellars’ giving campaign doesn’t stop there. The winery is now matching up charitable organizations’ needs for ongoing funding sources with the winery’s need for dedicated volunteer staffing through a program called, “*2X Success.*”

2X Success establishes a formal relationship between Olympic Cellars and one or more 501(c)(3) organizations centered on sustainable community partnership. The winery agrees to sell wine at its actual *cost* to a maximum of four 501(c)(3) organizations each year, in return for a committed number of volunteer hours, provided by the non-profits’ membership. The organizations can then host a fundraising event and sell or auction their earned wine.

Olympic Cellars successfully tested 2X Success during the 2004 harvest with *Operation Uplift*, a local non-profit organization that provides emotional support to cancer patients. Operation Uplift plans to sell its earned wine by the glass at a future fundraising event. The organization continues its partnership with Olympic Cellars today. Two additional non-profit organizations, Healthy Families of Clallam County and the Soroptomists, also participate in the program.

Environmental Sensitivity Demonstrated through Efforts to Promote Responsible Land Use

In late 2005, Olympic Cellars began fundraising to commission a micro-climate study that will identify areas on the Olympic Peninsula warm enough to grow cool weather varieties of grapes. Through much time, effort and relationship building, the \$15,000 goal was achieved in June 2006, and Dr. Greg Jones, a professor of climatology at Southern Oregon University and a leading expert in his field, was hired to perform the study. If climate and soils prove suitable for cool weather grape growing, the establishment of vineyards will help preserve the Peninsula’s historically rich agricultural heritage with a high value crop that doesn’t require much water. Vineyards plantings will also encourage culinary tourism, raising the North Puget Sound’s visibility as a wine region, and facilitate the creation of new jobs in the tourism and agricultural industries.

Into the Future

What initially started as a local *Charity of Choice* program has evolved over the years to include *2X Success*, a series of annual events supporting women and families (*Rosie the Riveter Contest, Working Girl No Labor Day Concert, Grape Stomp Harvest Party*), and support for new charities in states where *Working Girl* wines are sold. While continuing to grow the market for its wines, Olympic Cellars will simultaneously continue to grow the market for philanthropy. As a next step in its expanding network of support, Olympic Cellars will kick-off *Working Girl Wines Working for Your Community*, a grassroots, intracommunity initiative, in late 2006. Together we can make a difference!