

"Working Girl" Is Catalyst For Olympic Cellars Turnaround

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Located between Port Angeles and Sequim on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, and housed in a barn built in 1890, [Olympic Cellars](#) has a one-of-a-kind location. The story behind the winery is equally uncommon.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ➔ Olympic Cellars has prospered from taking a nontraditional approach, including supporting women's causes, screwcap packaging and nonvintage wine blends.
- ➔ The Working Girl line highlights the winery's female ownership, which appeals to other women.
- ➔ The key for the brand's marketing is not to make a wine for a specific demographic, but to make a wine that supports a specific demographic.

The first winery on the North Olympic Peninsula, founded as Neuharth Winery in 1979 and one of the first 15 wineries in Washington, Olympic Cellars had a rich heritage, but was facing bankruptcy in 1999. As its balance sheets bled red ink and the quality of its offerings deteriorated, Kathy Charlton was comfortably ensconced in Dallas with a lucrative corporate job. Then a call from her mother-in-law, which would change her life.

Charlton's mother-in-law had co-signed the loans of the Olympic Cellar's previous owners, an investment Charlton and her husband had been unaware of. Believing that the winery and property had value due to its premium location, the Charltons decided to purchase the failing business and run it from Texas. Soon, it became clear that a move West was in order, and in 2001, Charlton took over the winery's operations.

Starting from scratch, with no industry experience and only a winemaker on the payroll, she took a crash course in the wine business. "Frankly, I didn't

hold out much hope that I could turn the business around," Charlton recalls of those harrowing early days.

While the learning curve was steep, Charlton learned a great deal from approaching the business nontraditionally and interacting with customers hands-on from behind the bar. Eventually, as business improved, she was able to build a team of colleagues with complementary skills. Now Charlton has two partners: Molly Rivard, who is responsible for the tasting room and wine club, and Libby Sweetser, who handles events and merchandizing for the gift shop.

Owned and operated by women, it makes sense that Olympic Cellars has had success with female wine drinkers. The winery's big-gest seller is the Working Girl series of wines, first released in the fall of 2003, and now offered on Washington state ferries and in 15 states outside of Washington. The inspiration for the name came after a grueling brainstorming and blending session.



In an antique barn with the Olympic Range as a spectacular backdrop, Olympic Cellars provides a natural draw for tasting tourists.

"I leaned back in the chair and said, 'Ladies, I am exhausted. This working girl has got to go home,'" Charlton recalls. "We all sat up straight and said 'That's it! That's who we are: three women making wines.' The label design then took on the personalities and life experiences of each of the owners."

The Working Girl series consists of Working Girl White, Go Girl Red and Rosé the Riveter. Working Girl White represents Charlton, the ex-corporate powerhouse enjoying a glass of wine at the end of the day with her gal pals. Rivard, who has 10 siblings and is a staunch environmentalist, is Go Girl Red. Sweetser is a self-made woman with the "can do" attitude of the original Rosie the Riveter.



Interestingly, the "Olympic Women in Wine," as the three proprietors are known collectively, did not originally make a conscious decision to establish a niche market targeting women. They simply wanted to create a fun, distinctive and affordable blend with no "industry speak." In other words, they wanted the average customer to be able to pronounce the label's name and fully understand the description without consulting a wine expert.

While the Working Girl series reflects the personalities and tastes of the winery's owners, Charlton thinks that it is simplistic to classify them as "chick wines." In fact, Charlton does not believe that wine can be made for a specific gender. "We all know packaging matters to any consumer, but overtly targeting women through packaging is condescending, and I am a woman and it makes me mad. Our labels just happen to have three women on them," she says.

The key for a winery targeting a niche, Charlton believes, is not to make a wine for a specific demographic, but to make a wine that supports a specific demographic. This attitude is a key component to Olympic Cellars' triple bottom-line strategy, which includes providing charitable support to women's programs along with making a profit and respecting the environment by preserving farmland through responsible development.



"We own a small business, living the American Dream, pushing to thrive and not just survive in an industry that is consolidating. We can't compete on price, marketing, branding and distribution. We can only stay true to our mission and stay focused on our next goal," Charlton says.

Part of the owners' mission is to help empower women. To this end, they help launch new woman-owned businesses by selling their products in the winery's gift shop. Every year, Olympic Cellars hosts an event for

International Women's Day. This year, the winery spearheaded an effort that united three sister cities on the Olympic Peninsula in a multi-event gala. The events, which took place from Port Angeles to Port Townsend, culminated with a celebration at Olympic Cellars that included music, a bonfire, homemade soup and wine. Plans are currently underway to launch a new give-back program, supported by the sales of Working Girl wines, which will aid women and family programs in Washington.



For women who want to support other women while enjoying the scenic delights of Washington's North Olympic Peninsula, a Working Girl Road Trip might be in order. Named after the wine series, it is designed to make it easy for women to plan a get-away with female friends. Packed full of trip-planning resources, the winery's Web site (workinggirlwines.com) includes sample itineraries, shopping destinations, event schedules, and restaurant and lodging information. Upon arrival at Olympic Cellars, road trippers are awarded a goody bag before being photographed for the Road Trip Hall of Fame.

Sandwiched between the Olympic Mountains and the Straight of Juan de Fuca, the venerable barn accommodates not only the winery, but also a tasting room, gift shop, wine lounge and music venue. The handcrafted wines made in the barn are produced in limited quantities: 3,200 cases, up from 1,500 in 2001.



"Smaller wineries like ours do small handcrafted lots. That means a lot of manual Old World-style processing—we do not have all the technology of large wineries," Charlton says.

Olympic Cellars distinguishes itself from bigger wineries in other ways as well. The Working Girl wines are packaged with Stelvin screwcaps, which Charlton acknowledges still have the reputation as a closure for cheaper wines. Also, the wines are blends and nonvintage.

"The nonvintage part raises eyebrows, especially in the industry," Charlton says. "But it makes all the sense in the world. Nonvintage blends allow me to blend wine consistently from bottling to bottling and ensure the quality."

In addition to the Working Girl series, Olympic Cellars produces two other labels. The La Dolce Vida (sic) line consists of Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Syrah. The Dungeness Heritage series consists of Dungeness White, a semi-sweet Riesling and Dungeness Red, a Beaujolais-style Lemberger.

Each of the Working Girl labels represents one of the winery partners.

Benoit Murat—born, raised, schooled and trained in France—is Olympic Cellars' winemaker. Given his background, it comes as little surprise that he is also a culinary expert.

"Benoit is a great cook, so his wines pair very nicely with foods. The grapes shine through and the wines are well balanced. He makes a particularly wonderful rosé...there is very little room for error with a rosé," Charlton says.

Olympic Cellars has garnered a number of awards over the past several years, including a gold medal for the 2003 Dungeness Red at the 2005 Washington State Wine Competition. The key to its success?

"The key is to constantly improve your infrastructure, your knowledge and skills and sometimes get outside opinions via industry consultants. You need to taste other wines also," Charlton advises. "Bottom line, without good fruit it is hard to make a great wine. Benoit has a lot of vineyard experience and can work with our vineyards to get us the best fruit possible."

Currently, Olympic Cellars' grapes come from Eastern Washington's Columbia Valley through contracts with four vineyards. By the end of the decade, however, Charlton plans on producing wines from local grapes. Already, the winery is conducting a grape study aimed at identifying land that will sustain economically viable grapegrowing.

Charlton has now set down roots in Western Washington, and is proud of the fact that soon, locals will be able to drink wine made from grapes grown on the peninsula. While the transition from Dallas corporate veteran to Washington winery neophyte involved some turbulence, she is glad that she made the career change.

"I've enjoyed the involvement and new friends in our community," she says. "Some nights I still have the worry time in the middle of the night about making the right decisions. But most of the time, I'm super glad we didn't let Olympic Cellars go out of business."



French-trained winemaker Benoit Murat crafts well balanced wines to pair with food.