

Wine, women and Olympic Cellars

Published Saturday, February 7, 2004 in The Daily Harold, Everett, WA.

"Girls just want to have fun!" That's the mantra from the only all-woman winery in Washington.

Olympic Cellars Winery just outside Port Angeles, right on U.S. 101, is where the girls are not only having fun, but they're also delivering infectious merriment and mirth to all who visit.

There's positive energy emanating from the classic old barn, built before the 1900s, that has become the Olympic Cellars Winery headquarters. Backed by the majestic Olympic Mountains and facing Victoria across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, it houses the winery, tasting room, gift shop, wine lounge, a music venue and what must seem like home for the women responsible for the genesis of this wine wonder.

Winemaker Sara Gagnon, tasting room manager Molly Rivard and owner-manager Kathy Charlton, also known as the "Olympic Women in Wine," are the wind, hull and rudder that sail this ship through what is sure to be a sea of success.

Sara jumped feet-first into the world of winemaking back in 2000 when she applied for a position as an assistant winemaker under the previous owner and winemaker, Dan Caudill. In the spring of 2001 Sara took over the head winemaking duties after the sale of the winery to Kathy was finalized.

"Wow! There was a steep learning curve in the beginning," Sara said. "I knew though, after plowing forward, that I had found my passion and my calling. The whole thing just gives me a thrill, especially watching and tasting these wines evolve and become something special."

Sara's initial fascination with wine came about in the late 1990s after traveling to various wine regions and gravitating to tasting events around the area. I had the privilege of getting to know this charming woman as a regular patron and tasting customer at Wick-Ed Cellars in Everett. I witnessed her growing wine awareness and knowledge that led her to Olympic Cellars and the realization of her dream.

The beautifully appointed tasting room and gift shop at the winery are run by Molly, who is the queen of hospitality at Olympic Cellars. She greets visitors with sincere warmth and graciousness, holding court over the 100-year-old tasting bar where wisdom is dispensed along with the wine. In my earlier and rather sappy metaphor of the sailboat, you'd have to say that Molly is the hull because she keeps the whole boat afloat.

The wind in the sails is definitely conjured up by Kathy Charlton. As owner and general manager, Kathy's main responsibility is marketing, and boy, (I mean, girl) does she do that well. You get a strong sense of boundless energy, enthusiasm, creativity and passion when you talk with Kathy. For example, one of Kathy's hugely successful projects is "The Working Girl" series of wines.

The Working Girl White at \$13 is a zippy, slightly sweet blend of chardonnay and riesling while the Go Girl Red at \$14 is, in Kathy's words, "A lush, little number with the power to turn a gunnysack into velvet." Kathy is connecting to the community with this project by donating a percentage of the proceeds of the sale of the wines to the Gynocare Program at Family Planning of Clallam County.

Philanthropy and wine aren't the only things brewing at Olympic Cellars; there are a number of activities designed to promote just plain fun.

The women recently held a contest to identify the most romantic man on the peninsula. They were amazed at the response by all the adoring wives and girlfriends who entered their men. On Friday during their Valentine's weekend kickoff "Evening of Romance," the Olympic Cellars "Swoon-o-meter" will pick a winner from among the romantic finalists. That evening event is followed by the "Red Wine and Chocolate Gala" Saturday through Monday.

Cyndi Lauper may have recorded the hit version of the song, but these women over on the Peninsula are living it. At Olympic Cellars the girls **are** having fun. If you'd like more information about girls having fun at Olympic Cellars Winery, give them a ring at 360-452-0160 or visit their Web site, olympiccellars.com.