

Wine charm

With an appreciation for fine B.C. wines and a strong work ethic, retailer Tracy Gray turns her passion into a successful profession

By Denise Gaze

When raging wildfires scorched their way through Kelowna, British Columbia in the summer of 2003, Tracy Gray had just opened Discover Wines, an exclusive B.C. VQA retail store. Grand opening celebrations for the shop had to be cancelled as water bombers flew over the city trying to extinguish the blaze, which was not fully contained for a month. Over a third of all Kelowna residents, including Tracy herself, ended up being evacuated.

Fast forward ten years later and you will find the only thing still scorching is Tracy herself. Once the smoke cleared, Tracy went right back to work and this past spring opened a second location in Kamloops. A definite trailblazer, Dis-

cover Wines is now the number one wine store in B.C. The shop also carries a varied selection of home entertaining items, wine accessories and artisanal food products.

In a male dominated industry, Tracy has not only survived but thrived by offering over 800 varieties of B.C. wine. Discover Wines also provides a number of services for customers including wine education, a shipping program, gift wrapping, gift baskets and a Wine Club where members receive 12 different wines every two months. Available every day is a wine tasting counter and fun promotions like W.O.W. promoting a 'wine of the week'.

The store itself has the look and feel



of a high end boutique, with custom cabinets and all wines categorized and organized. It reflects the fact that 20% of Tracy's sales come from products other than wine.

"Our store does look quite upper end and customers often say wow, your prices are really great," Tracy adds. "I would rather people come back all the time to buy those little gifts and house wares items than to make it the once a year at Christmas stop".

Although gift bags are the top selling non-wine product in terms of unit sales, Tracy says crystal glassware and wine aerators lead the way in gross sales. The best selling item, however, is the Ice Chiller (see photos). This mold is filled with water and anything else the heart desires, from food to flowers. Tracy uses it herself in the shop regularly so customers can see how it works.

With 200 suppliers, Gray travels to not only Canadian trade shows in Edmonton and Vancouver, but also visits shows in Seattle, Florida and Las Vegas because she finds a lot of the gift suppli-



Tracy Gray, above, sells a variety of non-wine products as well, including the items in this Father's Day display.

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ers don't come to Canada or they don't have sales reps here for those really unique items. "I often hear customers say we have stuff that they haven't seen



One of the key sales strategies at Discover Wines is to take the items out of their boxes and display them, or use them, in front of customers.

anywhere else. That's what we built our reputation on."

Right now, anything with bright colours, glitter or jewels is on trend. Napkins, trivets and bottle stoppers make great impulse purchases when picking up a bottle of wine as a hostess gift. They are also easy to pack into the gift baskets.

To truly understand the success of Discover Wines one would have to note the strong and dedicated character of Tracy Gray. Unlike a regular retail store where merchandising is the main focus, Tracy has had to obtain a specialized wine license, and there are only 21 issued in the entire province!

Tracy explains: "there are many rules and regulations around these licenses, just as there are unique rules and regulations around any controlled industry licenses"

In order to open a second location, Tracy had to endure a lengthy and very competitive process in order to acquire a license that had been pulled from another retailer. To keep a license, you need to

meet minimum sales requirements. Only existing license holders like Tracy herself are able to submit a proposal. But her persistence paid off and Discover Wines opened the doors of its second store in April of this year after dealing with several years of red tape.

Not only is Tracy a talented merchandiser, she is in tune to what a tourist town like Kelowna needs. "We read all the tourist publications and study maps of the wine regions. Our staff are extremely knowledgeable as customers often ask for information about the wineries in the area."

Even the Chamber of Commerce Information Centre sends their visitors to Discover Wines. "At the end of a day of wine touring, these same people come back to the shop and buy additional wine to take home".

At Discover Wines, Tracy prefers not to have a lot of a particular product on the floor at any time. A model is kept out for display, but then the staff go to the back and get the item for the customer. "We don't have the room to have



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boxes piled up. We have to be very hands on with the customer. That is our philosophy: to be very service driven."

"Driven" might be Tracy's middle name. She keeps herself well occupied with a number of local events and she sits on the Board of Prospera, one of the

largest credit unions in Canada. "I have had a great opportunity to get a financial education that I have been able to transfer to my business."

She is also a member of the local Chamber and speaks at the University to young people who want to get into the industry. At the local high school, she will discuss the types of jobs students can have in the industry when they graduate which, in wine country, could include anything from working in a lab to working on a farm.

Tracy devotes time to her a few select charities but has had to come up with a plan to deal with the number of sponsorship requests she gets on a regular basis. "We take the many requests we get each week and we have a draw at the end of each month. The winner receives a gift package as well!"

Having started her retail career as a cashier at Canadian Tire at the age of 15, Tracy has been in retail her whole life



Left: Daisies are one of several flowers used in the wine chiller, a plastic mold that you fill and freeze to keep wine cold. Above: Tracy at the grand opening of her second store in Kamloops, B.C.

and says there is nothing else she'd rather be doing. Her husband also owns a couple of businesses. They both work seven days a week and are used to dealing with crazy hours. Add to that travel time for the couple, who also have a 14-year-old son, and Tracy admits it's difficult to juggle it all.

A favourite winter activity is skiing. "In the summer," she says, "we just enjoy the Okanagan Valley because it's so beautiful here. We have a crazy Australian shepherd blue heeler mix who loves to go to the beach." Tracy, who played piano as a child, also takes time out for singing classes once a week.

A hardworking entrepreneur, Tracy says her motto for living is a simple one. "You can have everything in life, but not necessarily all at the same time," she explains. "The things that I don't have time for right now, I will in the future."

The future also holds the dream of a third store, which she hopes to open within 10 years.

Despite its turbulent start, Discover Wines is now basking in the glory of the media/VIP ribbon cutting ceremony that was cut short by the wildfires, only now it's to celebrate the store's 10th anniversary. Thankfully, the only thing on fire this time is Tracy's passion for her family, her community and Discover Wines. 🍷

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