

“The plane crash

was a huge turning point for me,” Sara Gagnon says emphatically. “Anytime you stare death in the face, it rearranges your priorities.” She had had the dream of opening her own winery for a long time, but it was a near fatal plane crash in Olympic National Park in 2004 that provided the final push.

Sara’s choice seems almost inevitable when you hear her story. “Most people who know me and grew up with me are not surprised that I wound up doing this,” Sara says. It’s ironic, though, that when Sara first went away to college at Washington State University—in the heart of grape-growing country—she had no interest in wines.

It was after selling an espresso stand in Port Angeles that Sara moved into winemaking. “In the interim I had learned about the wine industry and how diverse it is,” she says. “I had enjoyed drinking the wines, of course. There’s such a vast world out there that if you say you aren’t a wine drinker, it just means that you haven’t found the wine for you yet.”

Sara had developed a connection with Dan Caudill, the owner of Olympic Cellars Winery, telling him that if he ever needed an apprentice to get in touch with her. Dan phoned Sara’s mom and said, “If she’s serious, have her call me.” Sara did, worked the 2000 harvest and became Dan’s apprentice. She wound up as head winemaker less than six months later, as he unexpectedly retired. Although she had a steep learning curve, Dan had been a great teacher. “I feel very fortunate to have worked with him,” Sara says. “He forced me to learn fast. It was very challenging.”

Sara stayed on when Olympic Cellars got new owners. “Olympic Cellars was where I learned the commercial aspects of the trade. I had already evolved my winemaking into making grape wines, not just fruit wines, before I started there,” she says. “I expected working for a commercial winery would be a lot different from what I did in my basement, but it wasn’t—it was just a lot bigger.”

Involved with creating the Working



Girl Wine series, she won 19 awards for her wines. The first wine she ever created, the Dungeness Red 2001, won gold, and she later won several double golds for her work. “That was a way I knew that I was

on the right track,” she notes. Sara worked for Olympic Cellars for five years, finishing with the 2004 harvest. “I got to learn about the different hats you have to wear as a winemaker.” Sara became a co-owner

at Olympic Cellars just before the plane crash.

Considerable paperwork is involved in running a winery, such as obtaining licenses and documenting sales. Sara decided that if she could master the paperwork, she could run her own winery. She had a lot of help, including an investment from her partner, Tami Hinkle, and support from Camaraderie Cellars, a winery near hers.

“It’s vital that we support each other,” Sara says of the other wineries on the Peninsula. “You want them to show well, because when people are wine-touring, you want them to have a positive experience, because, A, they’ll come back, and, B, they’ll frequent the wineries.”

Sara’s winemaking story actually begins in the early 1900s. The Gagnon family emigrated from France several generations ago, settling in Boston. Not satisfied with that location, four of the brothers—including Sara’s great-grandfather—headed west. Most of them worked in the early timber industry and her family historically has been associated with logging, but berries may be the next important crop.

Sara’s great-grandfather homesteaded in the Port Angeles area in the early 1900s. Her great-grandparents had a large farm

there, growing loganberries back in the 1920s and 1930s. Gagnon Road is named after her relatives and there’s a passel of them spread out on the Peninsula. Sara lives in the Dry Creek area, less than three miles from where she works. “Our house is actually on the property which has the old orchard on it. I feel very fortunate to have that on my property.”

Her roots extend deep into the soil of the Olympic Peninsula in another way. The berries grown here started the Gagnon family’s New World tradition of winemaking. Her great-grandmother made fruit wines all her life. “Lots of loganberry wine, lots of blackberry wine—indirectly she’s the one who taught me how to make blackberry wine,” Sara recalls. “She showed my grandfather and he proceeded to pass that on to me.” Sara remembers stories of her grandfather going to visit her great-grandmother and getting wine out of the cellar for special occasions.

“Like breakfast, lunch, and dinner,” she jokes. “Now, it wasn’t quite that bad, but it’s been pretty popular stuff with our family.”

Blackberry wine was Sara’s first focus and it remains a family favorite. She spent years honing her recipe, determining the

exact ripeness needed for a good wine. This year, she and Tami picked all the blackberries for the blackberry wine, going back to their patch dozens of times.

“Blood, sweat, and tears,” Tami says.

Sara agrees: “Quite literally it was a labor of blood, sweat, and tears. We were thinking, ‘Oh, great, we’ll go pick blackberries.’” They found a superb blackberry patch near Adventures Through Kayaking, another business that they co-own. They rent kayaks and provide guided tours.

The blackberry patch they found covered a crumbling industrial development. “There were just scads of blackberries. They have the sun beating on them all day long so they get incredibly ripe,” Sara notes. “It’s great because there are no pesticides back there, either.”

Whoever worked in the kayak shop each day would pick blackberries when it was slow. “We’d go there and pick and pick and pick,” Sara laughs. “We made one barrel’s worth—that’s one of these barrels back here—that’s how many berries we got. It probably took us 250 pounds of berries to make that one barrel’s worth.”

One barrel of blackberry wine translates into approximately 350 bottles. During the Red Wine and Chocolate Festival in February, Sara had the wine available for tasting, because she wanted feedback from her customers. Apparently, the customers thought the wine was outstanding, since she sold every bottle of it.

Blackberry wine only needs to age about eight months. Sara aged it in a neutral oak to make it more dynamic. A neutral oak is an older barrel, which doesn’t overwhelm the fruit. “If you put it in a new barrel, the wine would taste like a 2 x 4,” Sara quips. Sara’s recipe isn’t as sweet as many blackberry wines. “It expresses a little more of the fruit,” she says, “and leaves out a little bit of the sugar.”

Both Sara and Tami anticipate hectic schedules this summer with the two businesses, since both revolve around tourism and summer is the peak season. Sara focuses on the winery and Tami on the kayak shop, but they help each other out whenever possible.



“Tami helps out as much as she can, but she’s got a very good business going with the kayaking, so that takes up a lot of her time. It’s an easy sell because where we live is so beautiful. The grey whales are coming through now and every now and then we’ll get lucky and see them when we take a group out,” Sara says. “I used to be the main guide, but now I guide part-time because most of my energy goes here.”

Tami started Adventures Through Kayaking in 2000, but it was not until after the airplane accident that Sara determined to open Harbinger.

The accident was a bad one. Both Sara and Tami rode with one of their friends in a Cessna 182 which crashed in Olympic National Park, killing the pilot and leaving the two women battered, bruised, and mired in dense forest.

Sara had a broken sternum, had hit her head hard, and was bruised and battered. “I felt like I had been drug through a knothole, backward. It was a very traumatic experience and I don’t talk about it much, even now,” she says. “But it was one of those experiences in your life that, if you’re fortunate, allows you a second chance. I figured that since this was my life, I was going to live it my way.”

Although Sara and Tami managed to walk out of the forest to the highway, the experience changed Sara both physically and emotionally. She returned to Olympic Cellars Winery only three weeks after the crash to help them set up for the harvest, although she doesn’t know how she managed that. She gradually recognized that she was unable to maintain the physical pace required by the larger winery. After the winery hired Benoit Murat, and Sara trained him, she felt free to pursue her own dream.

Sara wanted, and needed, to live a lifestyle that allowed her to celebrate both her love of nature and her love of wines. Besides working with Tami at Adventures Through Kayaking, she decided to open Harbinger Winery.

“Harbinger’ is a messenger of things to come and I picked the name because I felt it represented me and my drive in life

to bring forward a really good wine,” she says. “It has a flow to it, it sounds familiar and it just makes people smile when they hear it.”

Given Sara’s family’s historical connection with the timber industry, her location is fitting. “This is an old logging truck shop that became the winery,” Sara says. “It was a repair shop up until August when I took over the lease. I did substantial redecorating, but we wanted to keep the flavor of the place, too. It’s got character with the big beams and trusses.”

The winery and tasting room are both enclosed in that old logging truck shop. “People enjoy being part of the winery,” she says, “so it was important for us to keep the tasting room in the winery. People feel like they are part of what is going on.” She tries to create a particular kind of experience for people. “I want people to feel welcome and comfortable, like this is a small oasis out here.

“Harbinger is a very small winery,” Sara adds, “and we are very hands-on.” She points out the wine press at the upper level of the winery, noting that it’s the press that they pressed out all the grapes with. “If you show up on the wrong day here,” Sara says, “I might put you to work.”

Sara and her friends pressed out 11 tons of grapes this year using a small press, a hand press called a ratcheting press. Since the press is only a 40 gallon press, that required a lot of manual labor. “Luckily I have a couple of very strong friends,” Sara says, “who like to work. We just kept going. We had lots of time and no money. We just kept filling it up and pressing it out.”

“It really is handcrafted,” Tami adds. “There is no machinery involved. Even the grapes are handpicked; every cluster is handpicked off the vine. They are treated very gently from day one. That’s what makes really good, exceptionally different wine than you would find in a grocery store.”

Harbinger created two wines with the 2004 harvest, starting with a Syrah and another red table wine, but for this next year they have Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Rose, Chardonnay, and a



GRAPEVINE

white table wine in addition. The goal is 1,000 to 1,200 cases per year.

One thing that makes their reds different is that Harbinger doesn't do extensive filtering. They do a little fining, although their last batch was unfiltered and unfining which makes the wine a little thicker. "You get the true essence of the wine in that bottle and you may have a little sediment on the bottom. I'm happy to see a little sediment in my bottle," Sara notes, "because that means everything that was supposed to be in that wine ended up in that bottle."

A lot of wineries focus on creating a clean, polished-looking product, but for Sara the emphasis is on purity and excellence. The process that begins with hand-picking and crush within a few hours, moves to hand pressing and continues with gravity feed to the barrels, which is both free and easy on the wine. Harbinger, like the other wineries on the Peninsula, gets its

grapes from Eastern Washington. Although Sara indicates that studies show that grapes will grow here, the varieties that she likes to use for her wines are still found in the Columbia Valley area.

"They like that sun, they like that heat, they like that cold weather. It makes for an intense wine," Sara says. "They like the drastic seasons."

On the other hand, the Olympic Peninsula is a great place to have a wine cellar because of the moderate temperatures. "We don't get these continually hot days nor does it drop down below freezing for more than a couple of days at a time, usually," Sara adds.

Sara's happy with the new wines she's created for Harbinger. Each year, she indicates, she learns a little bit more and her wines improve. She's particularly excited about the 2005 Cabernet Franc, which she thinks will be outstanding and show well.

But people don't have to be wine collectors to enjoy wines. "Wine is fun. It's a drink of moderation, a drink of health, and it's a part of everyday life. Wine is a great source of enjoyment for everyone," Sara says.

Sara used to be a serious wine collector, but after her accident she gradually used her whole collection. "I decided that I wasn't going to wait. If I have a fine wine, when it's ready, I'm going to drink it. Before, I was like most people, saving wines for a special occasion," she says. "But, you know what; Tuesday's a special occasion if you make it one. It's okay to celebrate life every day." ▸

Harbinger Winery is located at 2358 Highway 101 West, Port Angeles on the south side of the highway. It is open from Memorial Day through Labor Day, seven days a week, 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m.



SARA & TAMI