

Q & A WITH SONIE HANSEN

TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.

This month's feature: local businesswoman Sonie Hansen.



Sonie Hansen is the tasting room manager for Ginkgo Forest Winery in Tacoma's Old Town. A Tacoma native who now lives in Puyallup, she operates the outlet for the owners of an eastern Washington winery who fell in love with our waterfront and wanted a presence here.

Q: Where is Ginkgo Forest Winery?

A: The winery owners live and farm in an isolated place in eastern Washington in Mattawa (near Vantage) on the Columbia River. (At their winery) they turn 16 different grape varieties into whites, reds, roses, dessert wines, and blends. They also grow cherries and apples on another 100 acres of the land.

The winery lies at the foot of the Saddle Mountains in the Wahluke Slope American Viticulture Area (AVA), an isolated south-facing landform created by repetitive flooding which left perfect grape-growing conditions. The winery, established in 2006, is naturally bounded by the Columbia River to the west and south, by the Saddle Mountains on the north, by the Hanford Monument on the southwest, and by the Wahluke Slope Wildlife Refuge in the east.

The Wahluke Slope American Viticulture Area is home to more than 20 vineyards and three wine production facilities. The 81,000-acre region features about 5,652 acres of vineyards, nearly 15 percent of the total grape acreage in the state. It has the driest, warmest climate in the state, allowing nearly complete control of vine vigor and ripening through irrigation. This allows the vintner to combine his agricultural and scientific backgrounds, calling himself a scientist by training and a farmer by choice. He has planted several hundred of the winery's namesake ginkgo trees near the winery.

Q: What brought this winery's product to Commencement Bay?

A: Several years ago, the winery entered its very first vintage, a pinot noir, in a contest at Ray's Boathouse in Seattle. After successfully winning the contest and later winning many awards for the wine, the owners decided they wanted a broader presence than their existing, more isolated tasting room, at the winery in Mattawa. I had sold their wines wholesale previously, and they asked me to find the right place. We ruled out the Tri Cities, Prosser, and Woodinville because it is difficult to stand out (there). We focused on Tacoma's Proctor and Old Town neighborhoods and looked for a main floor location to be able to easily transport crates of wine in and out. The owner fell in love with the water and

shoreline of Commencement Bay, and after a long search for the right building, we found and remodeled the former Sandpiper Gallery, our current Old Town site. We put in hardwood floors, sheetrock, and a kitchen.

Q: How did you learn this trade?

A: I have mostly learned on the job. I took one class in Richland on developing one's taste and in the process was told I am what is known as a "super taster," part of 5 percent of the population who are bombarded with more flavors than non-tasters -- even with tasting water.

Q: What is the best part of what you do?

A: I like the interaction with people and introducing them to new sensations. Recently a man lit up in surprise after tasting a subtle dessert wine. He had never tasted one previously and did not expect to like it. I enjoy the wide-ranging topics that arise when people who don't know each other strike up an easy and natural conversation while tasting wine. They often find they have acquaintances or friends or locales or previous workplaces in common. It builds community in an unintentional way.

Q: Who comes to the tasting room?

A: Travelers from other parts of the country and world, Old Town residents who stop in while out walking their dogs, regular customers, and those who are in Old Town visiting other complementary businesses that spill over into this one.

Q: What would you like to see in Commencement Bay's future?

A: More tasting rooms from other wineries. People like a cluster of places to visit when they stop. That would not be a competitive threat because our wines stand on their own.