

Walla Walla port's wine incubator hatches first business

Trio Vintners is the first to move out. It will take up residence in the Drumheller Building.

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WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

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Trio Vintners co-owner Denise Slattery talks about her plans for feel of the winery's new tasting room on South Second avenue opening in July. Trio Vintners will be the first of the wineries to move out of the incubator buildings at the Walla Walla Regional Airport to establish a more permanent location, ahead of of the port's 6-year lease schedule. Thursday, June 10, 2010

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WALLA WALLA - The two places could not be more different for a winery.

One: a bare-bones building constructed with just enough square-footage to produce wine, but little space for a tasting room. The other: A relic from a historic hardware store perfect for a tasting room but no space for production.

Neither is the estate vineyard Trio Vintners co-owner Denise Slattery would inhabit if money were no object. So as the first tenant of the Port of Walla Walla's winery incubator complex to leave the proverbial nest this month, the move is bittersweet. She and her husband and Trio Vintners co-owner Steve Michener leave behind the familiar but stripped-down incubators surrounded by friends for a new space downtown filled with unknown possibilities.

For the Port of Walla Walla and the wine industry, as a whole, the move is just plain sweet.

"This is exactly what the commissioners had hoped would happen when the concept of the wine incubators came together," said Port of Walla Walla Executive Director Jim Kuntz.

The more than \$1.5 million winery complex on Piper Avenue was intended as a starting point for new wineries. The five-building village -- constructed in phases -- has served as a revenue source for the Port and a help to budding winemakers with little capital for facilities.

Tenants operate there on a six-year, nonrenewable lease. The 1,600-square-foot buildings have space for processing and barrel storage, plus a 500-square-foot crush pad. Rent increases each year. By the end, tenants are primed for the market and must move to make way for a new startup.

The three-building first phase of the complex was constructed in 2006 with help from a \$1 million state grant. The second phase was announced in 2007 with an additional \$500,000 from the state. Two more tenants came on board.

The beginning was lonely, Slattery said. Adamant Cellars was the only other tenant. Lodmell Cellars came shortly after. Few consumers really understood the concept. Fewer knew how to find the village on the edge of the airport property.

But with time, the winery neighbors began working together to promote themselves, offering special attractions during tasting weekends and major events. Bolstered by the addition of CAVU Cellars and Kontos Cellars, the village has grown into an attraction.

That's the part that's hard to leave behind, Slattery said.

"I'm really going to miss that pastoral setting, going to the (Walla Walla) Roastery and zooming past Tamarack (Cellars) and waving at (winemaker) Ron (Coleman)," she said.

Even the raw setting of the no-glitz buildings themselves has a special place for Slattery, who relocated to the area with Michener, who also works as a registered nurse, and an original third partner, Tim Boushey, to start the winery. Boushey has since returned to his Seattle-area roots.

"I'm going to miss a little bit of that raw, garage-iste thing," she said.

But the move, expected to be complete July 1, is a sign that Trio is established and ready for permanent

residence in the community. The winery has added an employee to the staff. And the possibilities at the new space in the historic Drumheller Building have brought out the veteran marketing professional in Slattery, who worked in communications in San Francisco before her wine career.

Located at 102 S. Second Ave., between Poplar and Alder streets, the new 750-square-foot tasting room is surrounded by banks and investment offices. Hence, Slattery has dubbed the location to wine club members as part of Walla Walla's "financial district."

Most recently home to a travel agency office, the spot was the one-time "nuts and bolts" section of the former Drumheller's hardware store. In its honor, Slattery and Michener are already hatching plans for a Trio "Nuts and Bolts" blend.

Offering a recent glimpse into the yet-to-be-finished space, Slattery said she wants the tasting room to embody a mid-century look, rather than a vineyard-like or contemporary feel. She plans to add retail items, including art, to the space.

The winery will continue to produce about 1,000 cases per year for the time being. As part of the move, Trio has partnered with Forgeron Cellars, and its wines will be created there under the direction of Forgeron winemaker and co-owner Marie-Eva Gilla.

Slattery said it's important as part of the introduction downtown that the space embodies and communicates Trio's brand. At the same time, it's also important to fit well into the neighborhood.

"We want to fit in, but also have a point of distinction," she said. "We want to be part of the community but also stand apart."

Fitting in wasn't much of a concern in the cookie-cutter incubators. Getting started was. And now that they have, Slattery and Michener take on the new challenges with a sense of continuity and their own history.

"That's the whole purpose of what that setting was: To get in and move on," Slattery said. "It's where we got our start and that's what the incubators are all about."

