

Trio graduates to new careers with startup

California rootstock

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - March 30, 2007

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Photo: Matt Hagen

Trio Vintners was started when Tim Boushey (left), Steve Michener and Denise Slattery joined forces.

While many winemakers dream of someday plying their trade on Northern California's grand stage, Denise Slattery and her husband, Steve Michener, ditched that opportunity to move to what they consider greener pastures: Walla Walla.

Four years ago, the couple was living in Oakland, Calif., when they decided to trade their day jobs -- Slattery worked in marketing, while Michener is a registered nurse -- for a career in the wine business. But, with no wine experience, they needed to find a place where they could live on one income while learning about winemaking and starting a winery.

They considered attending the University of California, Davis' renowned program in viticulture and enology, but ruled it out after taking a hard look at the finances and the time commitment.

"Staying in California was just too expensive, which made it difficult to live on one income while we went back to school," Slattery said.

So, in 2004, Slattery and Michener packed up their minivan and, with two small children in tow, high-tailed it to Eastern Washington, where they both enrolled in Walla Walla Community College's program in enology and viticulture while Michener also held a nursing job.

Now that they've both completed the program, they're launching Trio Vintners with fellow WWCC graduate Tim Boushey, and have an aggressive growth plan they hope will pave the way for a full-time winemaking career.

Housed in a new winery space built as part of the Port of Walla Walla's wine incubator project, Trio plans to open to the public in April, and just finished bottling the first 800 cases of an offbeat, five-varietal lineup that includes Sangiovese and zinfandel.

With wines priced between \$12 and \$24, Slattery said Trio will boost production to between 1,500 and 2,000 cases in three to five years, and could outgrow the incubator space by the end of its fourth year.

"We need to support two families, so we've got to grow a little faster than is comfortable for most wineries," Slattery said.

Boushey and his wife moved from Auburn to Walla Walla in 2004. Boushey works selling heating equipment and other industrial goods for the Seattle-based company Heatcon Inc., and plans to keep his job until the winery gets off the ground.

Given Trio's unique wine lineup, Slattery believes there is plenty of space to carve out a niche in Walla Walla, especially if the incubator's three wineries succeed in becoming a destination for the annual flood of wine tourists.

"It's definitely the right place to be at the right time," Slattery said. "If you've got some unique wines, there's room to do well as far as the smaller operations go."

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