

Making every wine special at Howell's MainStreet Winery

By George Moses

Howell's MainStreet Winery is a fully operational winery. They make everything in house. So, anything sold there is made there. "We've been open for five years now," says owner Sandy Vyletel. "We've expanded to where you can actually come in and sit down and have a glass of wine or a bottle of wine. We always have things to accompany the wine. We have cheese plates, baked brie. We always have appetizers every week that we rotate. Everything's always homemade. I'm trying to really do a push for very local. I'm trying to get all my cheeses from Michigan. I serve the Raclette from the Lelanau Cheese Company and I'm in touch with Zingerman's and I'm in touch with a farm out of Chelsea to have their cheeses in here."

Sandy had taken care of her mother for 20 years. When she passed away suddenly in 2006 she felt a need to do something bigger, to make a difference. "And I took the small inheritance that she left and invested it in downtown Howell. I tell people she is my silent partner. And one of the wines here is named after her; Sweet Grace."

Sandy and her husband, John opened the winery in 2007. "When we decided we wanted to open the winery, we drove into downtown Howell. We got a Dairy Queen and we started walking down the street and we got to this corner and crossed. And this place was a mess. O'Leary's had left and the floor was green and there was yellow wainscoting on the walls. And I looked in and said to John, 'This is it!' And he looked at me and he goes, 'Are you kidding me?' And I said 'No, this is our store!' And this was the first store we ever looked at and we never looked at another one. I said, 'This is where it has to be!' And, about a week later we were signing the lease."

Howell's MainStreet Winery opened 8 months later and people immediately started coming in. During the time it took them to remodel the building, anticipation had been growing in people's minds. During the first 2 weeks after the opening the first thing most people said when they entered was, "We've been waiting for you to open!"

"That was such an amazing thing for me. To have a vision, to implement it and have it actually come to life. And I still look back and feel so blessed that I got to experience this. And it is still very much like my baby." said Sandy.

They now offer a variety of over 30 different wines. "We're well known for our melon wine during Melon Fest. We do a lot of seasonal wines because people enjoy them. So we try to have something for everyone's palate. Pinot Noir, Pinot Grigio, Merlot and some unique things too like an Italian Amarone which you don't see very often. We also do a Pinot Grigio-Chardonnay blend. Something people are typically surprised to see is that we have ice wines and Port, and those aren't easy to come by. These are dessert wines. They're typically very expensive but we try to keep everything really reasonable."

Vyletel says she understands that wine can be very intimidating. Especially when people think they don't know very much about wine. She makes an effort to remove that emotion and just show people how to enjoy wine. "We have a full tasting bar so you can taste before you buy. That's really important because so many people are like, 'Well, what I read on the description somewhere else isn't really the flavors I can pick out.' So they love that they can taste it first. On Friday night it gets really busy in here. People come in and have a bottle of wine with friends. We have wine for everyone."

"Our whole business motto is we don't want people to drink wine only for special occasions. We want them to make dinner everyday a special occasion. And wine does that! When you open a bottle of wine, it's so special! So we always tell people 'Celebrate today!'"

The Winery also offers cooking classes. Chef, Renee Chicowski conducts the classes and they do a wine pairing to show people how to pair different components



Owner Sandy Vyletel loves spending time in her wine shop with customers who love wine.

with the wine and the food that they're cooking. You can go to their web site, www.howellsmainstreetwinery.com and check out their events page for more information.

"One thing that we added last year: Chef Renee and I decided to do a Mother's Day Brunch. We both have lost our Moms and this is kind of a tribute to our mothers. It's limited seating but we still do have a few tickets left for our Mother's Day Brunch and High Tea. We do quarterly wine dinners. In the fall, in partnership with Barb Barden we do the Haunted Howell Tours. Those are kind of fun. It starts at the Winery. The ghost hunters take you through Howell and tell you what they've found in different buildings."

"You can also have private parties in the Winery. That's

very big. Wedding showers are very popular, as are bridal showers, birthday parties, anniversary parties and Sunday brunch anniversary parties. "We can fit 40 people comfortably. All the information is on our website on how to do a private party. This kind of space creates socializing and camaraderie and it's more like a cocktail style party, where people are wanting to do things that are a little more unique. It's really cool because I help them plan it. I'm here during the party. So it actually feels like I'm part of their family."

One of the appetizers they make here is baked brie wrapped in a puff pastry and topped with brown sugar and walnuts and served with fresh fruit and crackers. "People come in for the brie every week. I actually had sisters come in from Wisconsin last week and they said 'I hope you have brie because we came all the way from Wisconsin to have your brie.' So, Wisconsin is a state known for its cheese industry and they came to Howell for brie."

"People, when they sit down to have a bottle of wine will order a cheese plate or flatbread or baked brie just to sit with friends. We tell people it's the best value because for \$25 or \$30 four people can enjoy a bottle of wine and an appetizer. We don't mark up our wine prices at all for guests to drink here. You can get a bottle of wine between \$12 and \$16 and enjoy it here where at a restaurant it would cost you \$30 or \$40."

"You can come here and make your own wine. Large customer batches of wine are fermenting and await the customers' arrival at a specified date to bottle them. And 8 to 10 weeks later they set up a bottling date and a lot of times they bring friends and they'll do all the bottling. We do custom labeling for them so they can call their wine pretty much whatever they like. So people get really creative with their labels. Right now we're very busy doing wine for weddings. We have one going out today. They did 180 bottles that they're giving away for their wedding. It's a nice favor!"

"Sweet Grace" is a Blackberry Cabernet. That's a little sweeter style wine because my Mom liked a little sweeter style wine. I tried to create it after a wine that I thought she would like."

"We're a destination spot, which surprises me. I never thought in 5 years in business, we'd have customers who come on a regular basis from an hour to an hour and a half away. We have people that come regularly from Parma, Royal Oak, Rochester and Canton. We have people that come from Ohio, Wisconsin and we have people who live in Howell who have taken bottles to their family and when they go to visit they're like "Oh don't forget to bring us more of that wine! We love the wine you brought from Howell!" So they always come in and say, "Oh, we're going to Arizona or we're going to Florida and we can't go without your wine!" I love that. I love that they think us special enough to give us as a gift to other people. That's amazing to me."



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Downtown Howell's winery is a tastefully remodeled building that used to house O'Leary's Paint Store.

Howell's MainStreet Winery is located at 201 W. Grand River in downtown Howell Phone: 517-545-9463