

# Family-owned winery places focus on building community

By **DAVE LEDER**  
For the Capital Press

Gilbert Cellars has built up enough name recognition over the past 15 years that the brand would have no problem developing a following beyond the West Coast.

But whenever the owners of the Central Washington winery consider ramping up production, they always prioritize their Yakima Valley roots.

"We've had opportunities to open other tasting rooms outside of Yakima, but what we really want is to stay local," said Laura Schlect, the marketing director and one of four managing partners at Gilbert Cellars. "We like to focus on our family story, and the Yakima Valley is where our story is the strongest."

The family tale goes back five generations and involves much more than growing grapes and producing top-shelf wines. The Gilberts have been growing apples and pears in the region since the late 1800s, when Schlect's great-great-grandfather, H.M. Gilbert, started the Gilbert-Richey Fruit Co. The business expanded to include cherries and stone fruits, but it wasn't until much later that the family decided to venture into winemaking.

In 2002, Schlect's uncle, Curtiss Gilbert, purchased his first vineyard on the Wahluke Slope near Mattawa, Wash. He began working with a local winery to produce his wines



Dave Leder/For the Capital Press

**Justin Neufeld, the head winemaker at Gilbert Cellars, draws a sample from a barrel at the winery and event center in Yakima, Wash.**

— known as a "custom crush" — which helped the family realize the fruit's long-term potential.

"When Curt first started growing grapes, he had no plans to start a winery," Schlect said. "But the fruit that was being grown there was so good that he started testing out some different varieties."

After the Gilberts learned the subtleties of grape growing, they began planting more vineyards in the Columbia Valley and Horse Heaven Hills AVAs. Not long after, Gilbert's nephews, Sean and Nathaniel Gilbert, produced the first vintage under the Gilbert Cel-

lars label in 2004.

Nathaniel was the head winemaker until 2007, when Justin Neufeld joined the team. Curtiss Gilbert's daughter, Meg, returned home with Schlect in 2010, followed by sales manager Charlie Gilbert and his wife, Gloria, the general manager. Many other family members also have been involved over the years.

"Like most small businesses, the one constant with us is our family," Schlect said.

The company has operated a tasting room and event center at its winery in west Yakima since 2008, and also opened a tasting room in

downtown Yakima so the family could share their love for Central Washington with more people.

Their summer outdoor concert series, Music in the Vines, has become a big draw for locals and tourists alike, while the tasting room has helped bring a fresh allure to downtown.

"We want to be a concierge for Yakima, and having the winery and tasting room have helped us show other people how wonderful this Valley really is," Schlect said. "We believe we're here for a reason, and building a strong community is what we are trying to do."

Today, Gilbert Cellars produces about 4,000 cases of wine per year, selling its products in 20 markets in Washington, Oregon and California. And while their varietals have earned acclaim across the West, the majority of their wine is sold in the Yakima Valley.

By focusing on their rich family history and love for the region, the family believes they can deliver a better experience to their customers — many of whom are their neighbors.

The partners believe approachability is their biggest advantage.

"With 900 other wineries in Washington, it's hard to stand out," Schlect said. "But when you can talk about what you do differently — what you do best — that gives you authenticity."

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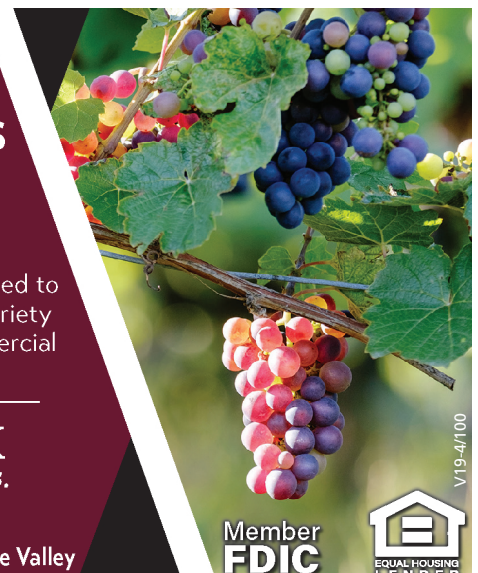
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