

Boutique winery in Central Washington built on hard work

By **DAVE LEDER**
For the Capital Press

Nikki Samaniego enjoys the tasting room side of owning a winery. Pouring wine, talking with customers and sharing stories about the Yakima Valley are much more her speed than working out in the vineyards.

The co-owner of Severino Cellars in Zillah, Wash., prefers to leave all of the dirty work to her husband and father.

“The wine industry has a romantic appeal that is shaped by movies and magazines, but making wine is really hard work,” said Samaniego, who started the winery in 2004 with her husband, Severino — the winery’s namesake — and her parents, Jay and Linda Spurlock.

“I have a lot of respect for people who do this kind of work,” she added. “My husband and my dad do most of it by hand, and they spend a lot of time doing other tasks like cleaning and sanitizing. They also work outside where there’s no shade for miles. That’s not for me. I’d rather be in the tasting room, where everything is warm and fuzzy.”

Samaniego keeps the books and manages the tasting room five days a week with help from her mom. Linda Spurlock also helps take care of the grandkids when she’s not working at the tasting room, a turn-of-the-century farmhouse conveniently located off the Yakima Valley Highway.

“We’re just a typical small family business,” Samaniego said. “When people come in here, they are talking to a family member 95% of the time. That familiarity has become a big part of our brand.”

The same is true out in the vineyards, where Severino Samaniego (the winemaker) and Jay Spurlock take care of every task,

from bottling and labeling to trimming vines, to changing tractor tires.

Samaniego received his training at Central Washington University, while Spurlock is a retired electrical engineer who likes to tinker with heavy machinery and water lines.

“We have our hands in everything,” Nikki Samaniego said. “We’re literally involved in every aspect of the business, and that’s why we love it so much.”

Severino Cellars grows five grape varieties — Viognier, Riesling, Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon — on 14 acres in the Rattlesnake Hills AVA. The family plot contains an additional 15 acres that could one day be used for wine grapes, plus another 30 acres that they contract out to other farmers.

The vineyards have been producing all of the family’s grapes since 2010, giving them a strong, nutrient-rich root stock from which they craft seven wine varieties known for their bold character.

“Waiting for the vineyards to start producing all of our grapes was hard, but it’s been very rewarding,” Samaniego said.

The family also grows a limited variety of red-wine grapes at their tasting room in Zillah, but those are just for show. Samaniego said she enjoys sharing her expertise with her customers, and she likes that she can occasionally help home winemakers improve their craft.

“Talking about the process is really fun, especially when people ask a lot of questions,” she said. “One of the things I like most about working here is educating people about what we do.”



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Severino Cellars has a tasting room allowing visitors to sample their wines.

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