

Women Owned Businesses

We are doing a highlight series on Women Owned Businesses

Each issue will highlight 5 women owned businesses. We will give you an exclusive interview with each of these inspiring women and help you connect with their businesses. It's time to put our money where our mouths are and support local businesses.

According to a new report from the Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy. (Source e www.sba.gov) Women make up more than 50% of the U.S. population, and they have grown to be 47% of the work force. They have surpassed men in educational attainment, with over 33% of women having a bachelor's degree or higher. Women control \$14 trillion, or 51%, of U.S. personal wealth and are now the primary source of income in over 40% of households

The **National Association of Women Business Owners** has the stats on where women stand as far as business goes and it's pretty exciting. Their website is a wealth of information. If you are thinking about following your dreams this is a good place to start to gather material you may need. www.nawbo.org

Women Owned Business in the United States

More than 9.4 million firms are owned by women, employing nearly 7.9 million people, and generating \$1.5 trillion in sales as of 2015.

Women-owned firms (51% or more) account for 31% of all privately held firms and contribute 14% of employment and 12% of revenues.

Over the past seven years, the overall increase of 8.3 million (net) new jobs is comprised of a 9.2 million increase in employment in large, publicly traded corporations, combined with a 893,000 decline in employment among smaller, privately held companies.



LaRue Wines

Photo Credit: Courtney Dawn Photography

Tell us a little about yourself and your childhood.

I was raised in a small agricultural town in California where my dad owned a hay-hauling business, as well as a walnut orchard. I grew up immersed in the world of agriculture and was never afraid to get my hands dirty, whether it be driving tractors or pruning walnut trees. It was no surprise when I set my sights on a degree in Agricultural Business at Cal-Poly. During my freshman year, I attended a seminar on the breadth of the agriculture industry where the topic of wine was discussed. I remember sitting in that lecture at 18 years old and knowing right then and there that making wine was the path I wanted to pursue. It was the perfect combination of farming, science and creativity. So I took on Wine & Viticulture as a second major and set on the path to making wine my career.

When did you decide you wanted to start your own company?

Growing up a part of a family-owned business, I witnessed first-hand the hard work and gratification that comes with owning your own business. My parents constantly encouraged me to follow my dreams and that I could accomplish most anything if I set my mind to it. Growing up in that environment, I felt empowered from an early age that one day, I too could work for myself and own my own business.

Was there a specific moment when you knew this was what you wanted to do?

This is a great question. Because the answer is yes, there was a very specific moment when I knew that starting my own wine label was what I wanted to do, but it happened way sooner for me than I ever could have imagined! I was 26 and working full-time as the associate winemaker at Kamen Wines in Sonoma. It was while here that proprietor, Robert Kamen offered me the opportunity to make my own wine at his facility – which I shrugged off as something that was too premature for me to be thinking about. But then, serendipitously, another industry friend and advocate for my solo career offered me the opportunity to share a small surplus of fruit from a few exceptional Sonoma Coast vineyards that I adored. This was the moment that I knew I had to take the leap.



Katy Wilson, founder and owner of LaRue Wines laruewines.com

After you made the decisions, what steps did you take?

I started off in really great shape. I had access to incredible fruit, I had a place to make my wine and I even had a business plan on how to start my own winery that I wrote for my senior project in college. After a few tweaks to the plan, I then set upon looking for funding and investors. I had no money, my parents had no money, and everyone I spoke with wanted 50% or 51% of the business. With my intention to only make 500 cases of wine max, that proposition just wouldn't work financially. I started to feel really defeated and even flirted with the idea of giving up. Then, a friend and fellow winemaker from Napa came to me and said, "I'm going to loan you the money, and you're going to pay me back when you can. I don't want any ownership in your company and if I can give you any advice, it would be to not give up ownership." Shortly thereafter, in the Fall of 2009, I harvested my first vintage of LaRue Wines.

How did you fund this project?

See answer above. I am proud to say that I have paid back the loan to the silent investor that helped get LaRue off the ground!

WOMEN OWNED BUSINESS

Photo Credit: Courtney Dawn Photography



laruewines.com

What were the hardest hurdles?

For me, the most difficult hurdles were figuring out how to balance my time. I launched LaRue Wines while simultaneously working as the associate winemaker at Kamen Wines. In 2012 I was presented with an opportunity to make wine in a consulting role for two small Sonoma-based wineries. I just couldn't pass it up. So at this point, here I was still getting LaRue off the ground, consulting for two winery clients AND still working full-time at Kamen all the while. It was a lot of hours and an endless juggling act. By 2014, the consulting business had begun to take off and I was fortunate enough to add an additional two clients to my roster, which meant that something had to give. Ultimately, I left Kamen in 2014 to pursue the consulting business, as well as LaRue – and it's been full steam ahead ever since. I currently make wines for Anaba Wines, Claypool Cellars, Reeve Wines and Smith-Story Wines Cellars and this year marks the 10-year anniversary of LaRue Wines!

Did you have a mentor?

I have had several people over the years who have helped me out along the way and who I have sought out for advice. For me, I have taken an accumulation of information and advice along with my own viewpoints to develop who I am today as a winemaker and business owner.

What was the best thing you did to grow your business?

I would say the best thing that I did to grow my business was to never give up. On the sales side, you need to try out different avenues and sometimes they don't work out. You are constantly pivoting to see what works for your business.

Do you feel it was more difficult because you are a woman? I've definitely experienced challenges along the way as a female in a largely male dominated industry, and I've also been championed and supported by many male counterparts within the industry as well. When I was starting out in the industry as a harvest intern, I had to work harder than any man who had my same experience level and knowledge. While I feel like women are making a lot of strides to improve the gender gap in wine, there's still a long way to go. And it starts with us. I'm proud to advocate for women in wine with leaders like Amy Bess Cook, founder of WOW (Women-Owned Wineries) Sonoma, which advocates for the wine industry's most talented and tenacious women and continues to help shift the narrative for the future of female leaders.

Do you think social media is important?

Social media is a great way to share and interact with customers in a very real-time way. This is definitely an area that I would like to improve upon as my business matures, but nothing can ever compare to the experience you have wine tasting in the vineyard or sharing a great bottle of wine with the ones you love. For people who don't have the opportunity to come and visit wine country, it is a great way to get some insight to what happens throughout the year. When I do post on social media, I try to give a sneak peek into what I am doing in the vineyards and the winery.

What is the happiest memory from this journey?

This year marks the 10th anniversary of LaRue wines and in August I celebrated with all of my longtime customers, friends and family where we opened every bottle of LaRue I have ever produced. To see everyone together in one place and have the opportunity to literally experience a decade's worth of blood, sweat and tears was priceless. It was one of those evenings that I wished would never end and definitely one of the happiest memories so far on this incredible journey.

Where do you see your company in 5 years?

I hope to be in a similar place to where I am now! I do not plan to grow the production of LaRue. I want to keep it around 500 cases, which is where production is currently. At this level, I am able to do most of the work myself and if I were to grow, then I would need to hire more people and I would not be able to do everything that I love to do that makes LaRue what it is - a wine that comes from my heart. I also really enjoy making wines as a consulting winemaker and helping my clients to achieve their vision. This also keeps me very well rounded in what is going on outside of my few LaRue vineyards. As a consultant, I am working with four wineries and over 50 different vineyards.