

Brash, Bold, Barlow

When Victoria's popular food and wine expert has something to say -- which is quite often, usually loud and always with passion -- people listen

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Glenn Barlow is passionate about food and wine and life on southern Vancouver Island, and he's created a business career out of all three.

Exuberant, tenacious, loud -- those are other descriptive words from friends and associates. But passion is the one that comes up often.

Barlow is "somebody who's got the passion," said Edd Moyes, general manager of the newly-opened Victoria Estate Winery, who hired Barlow as a consultant.

Publicist Deirdre Campbell has worked with Barlow on different projects and events, and uses the same word.

"The biggest thing about Glenn is his passion," she said. "He'll see you on the street and he'll grab you and tell you about his latest thing, which is usually about food."

Barlow, a food and wine consultant and retail wine store owner, started in the business as a teenager at The Keg. He was one of hundreds of staff now all over Victoria in different restaurants and bars who were trained by then-owner Jim Blackmore. "Food and beverage has been in my blood," said Barlow, whose mother worked as a "genie" at the old Century Inn, a cocktail waitress who wore a harem-style outfit.

There were only four Kegs in Canada then and Barlow smiled as he described one of his highlights there. Two cooks had been fired and another had left the restaurant, so Barlow stepped in on a busy Saturday night. "I was still in Grade 10 and a grill cook," he said.

He almost burned the place down when a grease fire got going. The automatic extinguishers finally came on, but the clouds of smoke cleared out all the customers.

Blackmore said Barlow stayed on after that night, worked up from broiler assistant to second cook, then first cook, in charge of the kitchen in the Keg's heyday when the restaurant might serve 500 steak dinners in six hours.

"Actually, he was a damn good cook all those years," said his old boss, who recalls sharing "many a beer with him" after those hectic nights.

"Any attention he's got is well deserved," said Blackmore.



CREDIT: John McKay, Times Colonist

Wine merchant Glenn Barlow outside his Commercial Alley office off Yates Street. The temporary tattoo on his bicep reads 'sauce hounds'.



GLENN BARLOW OUTSIDE HIS COOK STREET WINE SHOP: 'bon vivant around town.'

Barlow has worked hard to get this far. Besides an extensive consulting practice, he now owns two VQA wine stores selling B.C. products. Earlier this year, he bought out his two partners, Ian Sutherland and David Pyatt.

And Barlow is trying to open a third store in partnership with owners of Suze/Lucky Bar that would focus on imports, especially his favourite Italian wines.

He's learned a lot in three decades in the restaurant and wine business, soaking up information where ever he worked.

Herald Street Caffe was an early influence when it was owned by founders Mark and Helen Bell.

"I would go in and sit on the freezer and just pepper Mark with questions," said Barlow. "'Why are you doing his? Why are you doing that?'"

Short courses and stints in school and knowledge picked up the practical way have accumulated. He worked for several years for the legendary Vancouver restaurateur Umberto Menghi as wine director of his seven places. He spent several years with a big wine and spirits importer, and has toured wine regions and tasted some of the best wines.

Barlow's a native Victorian, but one who left to work and come back half a dozen times. Once he worked on seismic crews up north in harsh winter weather when "I thought I was going to die."

Barlow dresses in baggy shorts and T-shirt, usually displaying the wine stores' three-headed dog logo.

His casual style of dress bugs the heck out of some people. "That is definitely one area where Glenn and I don't see eye to eye," said Moyes.

"He drives me absolutely insane," said Moyes, a natty dresser himself. But he's is only half-serious about the dress-code violations, and calls Barlow "a young eccentric."

He has equally strong opinions about Barlow's wine expertise. "He's doing wonderful things for this winery," Moyes said. "He knows what he's talking about. He's been well-received by some of our customers. He was basically on the cutting edge when he opened his first VQA store."

Barlow's business strategy is to get positioned for the inevitable licensing and regulation changes coming, as the province shifts to more sales at private stores. If local people don't do it, we may wake up one day to an industry dominated by big-box liquor stores from Alberta, he said.

Campbell said he's one of the people helping to make Victoria and the Island a destination on the culinary tourism trail.

"It's not just about selling wine." Barlow is "good at linking it all together," she said.

John McGarry, a production information specialist at the Liquor Distribution Branch warehouse in Victoria, has known him since the mid-1980s when Barlow was a wine agent.

"Glenn is a bon vivant around town," said McGarry.

Barlow's carefree days may be numbered. The ultimate single guy who's had lots of girlfriends over the years is about to be married in January.

"It shocked the hell out of all of his friends," said Cafe Brio owner Greg Hays, who's known Barlow since both were at the Herald Street Caffe. "He was the eternal bachelor."

His fiancée is another food and wine enthusiast, Kerry Meridith Jones, who works at the Victoria Estate Winery and Canoe brewpub and restaurant, and once was a rep for Vignetti Zanatta, the Duncan winery.

It seems the perfect fit. They're both keen and enthusiastic and Barlow said each understands the other's commitment to the industry.

"It's tough to find someone who shares the passion, and the weird hours," he said.

Where will Barlow be in five to 10 years? "I expect to be a father," said the man who grew up in the midst of three brothers and a little sister. "We're going to have babies. I expect to work a solid five-hour day and be a Mr. Mom."

ESSENTIALS:

Birthplace: Victoria. Age: 45.

Family: Engaged to Kerry Meredith Jones, with the wedding set for early in the new year, on the beach at Kona, Hawaii.

Experience: Worked at The Keg here, nine years with Umberto Menghi as wine director of his seven Vancouver restaurants.

Business: Owns Oak Bay and Cook Street Village Wines, VQA stores selling B.C. wines. Wants to open a third downtown for import wines. Extensive list of restaurants he's consulted for.

What's with the logo: It's Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the gates of hell. Barlow calls it his saucehound. "It guards the gates of all the wine cellars of the world."

Favourite restaurants: Likes Brasserie Le'Ecole very much. There's so much going on, it's tough to keep up: "Camille's, Temple, Paprika, Brio and the Aerie are all doing some amazing food." Zambri's and Suze also get praise.

Favourite wine: Champagne. It goes with everything.

Success in business: "You need to be part of the community. You have to be part of the wine community."

Next goal: A food and wine TV show. He's working on a concept with Temple general manager James Hillman -- they call their Barlow and James partnership "cooler cuisine."

Ran with fact box "Essentials " which has been appended to the story.; Profile of Glenn Barlow.

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