



*Sylvia Johnson, co-owner of Richmond Home Brew Supply by Janet Clement
Coastal Journal contributor*

RICHMOND — When Sylvia and Stephen Johnson learned their home brew supply store in Farmingdale was closing, they looked at each other and asked, “Where are we going to get our supplies now?” And at that moment, an idea was born.

After doing their marketing research, the couple opened Richmond Home Brew Supply at 52B Maine St. in Richmond on June 30.

If this is one’s introduction to home brewing of wine, beer and mead, one discovers, upon entering this brightly lit shop, a whole new world of home brewers and home brewing – a world that, according to the Johnson’s supplier, has tripled in size every year for the last 10.

Sylvia believes this is occurring because, “As our society gets more technical, people want to do something with their hands to express their creativity and to relax.” She explains that home brewing is, in a way, like any other hobby. People become deeply involved in the art of making these beverages. Home brewers love to compare notes and taste each other’s products. This makes brewing a social activity in the midst of growing societal isolation. Home brewers have the satisfaction of enjoying the creation and consumption of their brews.



Sylvia, who was a Title 1 Tutor for grades kindergarten through eight for 18 years at the Marcia Buker School in Richmond, said she “re-careered” herself when she and her husband opened the shop.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she said. “I love teaching, but when politics got in the way of really meeting the needs of the children, I wanted to stop beating my head against the wall.”

Her husband Stephen is a Senior Systems Software Engineer for L.L. Bean in Freeport, or as she affectionately refers to him, “a computer geek.” He makes the beer; she makes the wine.

Their 28 year-old son Russell, who is also a “computer geek” and lives in Farmingdale, prefers drinking his father’s beer to making his own.

Several threads in Sylvia’s life came together when she and her husband opened the shop. Her father, Roy Hodges, who lived in Livermore Falls, was a home brewer.

“We helped him out in the early 2000s,” she said, “and he gave us a love for the process. He would take his wines to the Common Ground Fair and win ribbons. When he died in 2009, we started making wine on our own as a tribute to him. We really enjoyed it, and it took off.”

At that time, Sylvia was making wine, with her husband helping out a little, but not paying much attention to the process. Then one day he asked, “What does it take to make beer?” He started

reading “The Complete Joy of Brew Making,” considered the Bible of home brewers, and he, too, soon became a full-fledged member of the family’s home brewing tradition.

Sylvia loved both her cooking and chemistry classes in high school and the University of Maine, Orono, where she majored in Childhood Education. So you might say she already had the aptitude and interest for brewing. She was fascinated with the process of the combination of the elements into substances and their interactions. She even has a “Periodic Chart” of brewing on the wall of the shop. So using yeast in the brewing process just represents the fusion of her academic interests.

Sylvia has been up to Bartlett Maine Wines in Gouldsboro, famous for its blueberry, apple and pear wines. She has also to been to vineyards in Pennsylvania and Virginia, and would love to visit California. That day in the shop, she had a batch of wine brewing. She had added blueberries, blackberries, and several other fruits, 14 pounds in all, to the grape mixture.

“I just racked it, and it [turned] a beautiful blush pink,” she said.

“Racked” means to take a tube and siphon off the clear liquid and leave the sediment. This is done until the wine is crystal clear, a minimum of two times; however, she does it three or four.

For those brave enough to venture a little further into wine making terminology, the word used to describe sediment falling to the bottom of the brewing vessel and why one racks, is “flocculate,” Sylvia said. “Floc” by itself refers to “a flocculent mass formed by the aggregation or assemblage of a number of fine suspend particles,” according to Webster’s Seventh Collegiate Dictionary. Learning this nomenclature must be part of the fun of brewing, rather like learning a different language. For the uninitiated, it is a puzzling maze at first.

And how does the product get its alcohol content?

“The yeast added draws up the sugar, giving off carbon dioxide and alcohol,” said Sylvia.

When asked if alcoholics might take to the brewing process, Sylvia shook her head.

“I don’t see alcoholics being that patient,” she said. “Especially when some of the products need to age a long time before they are best for drinking.”

She then described how the unique and special Ice Wine is made.

“One begins with grapes that have been hit by the frost so the sugar has become really concentrated, thick and sweet. It takes a lot of time to make. Germany and Upstate New York are famous for this type of wine,” she said.

The shop sells kits for making many different types of wine and all turn out six gallons. The wines get their names from the grapes used – for example, Cabernet, Sauvignon, Chardonnay, and Merlot from red grapes, and Riesling and Chenin Blanc from white grapes.

“This is not Welch’s grape juice,” she said.

Apparently, the grapes one can buy at the grocery store are not used in wine making.

“You can use them, but you would be very disappointed in the outcome. It doesn’t have the right sugar profile,” she said.

The grape concentrate found in the kits comes from all over the world. For example, the Pinotage grape is grown in South Africa. Others are grown in California, Chile, Italy and other countries. Her kits come from Wine Expert in British Columbia. “Canada is a big leader in brewing as their ‘sin tax’ is even higher than ours” she said.

But why else bother to make your own wine and beer?

“Commercial products on the shelves in stores from big companies contain preservatives and additives to increase their shelf life and to hasten the brewing process. You also know what is in it when you make your own. It doesn’t taste much different than what you buy in the store,” she said.

One can also get the products and the know how to make mead at Richmond Home Brew Supply. Mead brings to mind Vikings clinking tankards of the beverage and indeed it is a very ancient drink made with honey. Tasting like wine, it may have been one of the first drinks with spirits, probably due the ease of making.

Their logo, designed by a friend, depicts a cooper making a barrel to hold wine, reminding people that they are going back to the older ways of doing things, at slower and more relaxed pace.

“We are a full service brewing supplies shop catering to the home brewer of beer, wine and mead. Whether you are looking for a specific ingredient, a piece of equipment, we have the solution. If you have never brewed before, be sure to join us for one of our free DIY (do it yourself) beer brewing or DIY wine making classes,” reads their brochure.

Sylvia said, “While we can’t carry everything, we will carry whatever a customer wants.”

Hours are Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, from noon to 7 p.m.; Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; and Sunday, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Closed on Thursday with store hours continuing to evolve to better meet the needs of their customers. For more information, call 737-7140, visit www.RichmondHomeBrew.com, or look them up on Facebook.