

With high-profile community work and a savvy wine selection, Liquor World has become a top-flight wine destination in Northwest Arkansas

By Denise Schnurr • Photography By Don Shreve

Spring is approaching, which means Kent Starr, owner of the 15,000-square-foot Liquor World in Fayetteville, Arkansas, has little time to talk. It's not shelf stocking or inventory reports that keep him busy; it's his social and volunteer activities—namely the Art of Wine Festival, a three-day tasting extravaganza in June to benefit the local Walton Arts Center. But Starr isn't simply an attendee; he's one of the event's planning partners.

Fayetteville may not be known as a wine-tasting mecca, but each June hundreds of winemakers and 1,300-plus oenophiles from across the country gather for this tasting weekend, which showcases more than 600 wines from around the world and cuisine from 20 area restaurants. The event attracts famous faces, such as Kate MacMurray from MacMurray Ranch Vineyard, Gina Gallo of E&J Gallo Winery and Michael Martini of Louis M. Martini Winery.

"I feel very strongly, as a local business owner, that we should support the communities in which we live," says Starr, who places credit firmly with the event's planning committee and with his own general manager and wine manager, Kim Neeper-Crawford. "We're proud of Fayetteville and Northwest Arkansas. This is a very giving community." And give to the community Starr does: In 2008, the Art of Wine Festival earned more than \$100,000 for the Walton Arts Center, which uses the proceeds to fund educational arts programs for more than 25,000 area children.

Such philanthropic activities come naturally to Starr, who was born and raised in Fayetteville. Starr opened Liquor World in August 1993, expanded the location by 6,000 square feet in 2002 and boosted his sales to reach more than \$5 million in 2007. But, in his typical way, Starr credits others before himself—namely Neeper-Crawford and managers Chad Bartlett, Victor Gerleman, Darin McDonald, K.C. Lynch and Bo Tolley.

"Yes, they make me crazy at times," Starr laughs, "but it has taken many people working very hard to build this store. I've been lucky to find some of the greatest people to help me grow Liquor World into one of the state's highest volume stores."

Pumping Up The Volume

Back in the early 1990s, Starr—who has a master's degree in business management from the University of Arkansas—was an executive for a Wendy's franchise division in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His father, Joe Fred Starr, enticed him to move back to Fayetteville to become manager and part-owner of a liquor store. "I didn't know if I would be interested in selling wine at the time, but here we are 25 years later," he says. "It gave me business experience, even though the business didn't always go the way the book said."

But the experience did inspire Starr to strike out on his own: Soon after joining his father's business he sold his stake and began plotting his vision for Liquor World, which he opened in a shopping center owned by his family.

Fayetteville is a vibrant town, boasting the main campus for the University of Arkansas and the headquarters for Tyson Foods Inc., with Wal-Mart Stores Inc.'s global headquarters just 25 miles away. As many shoppers come from surrounding dry counties to purchase alcohol, the average register ring at Liquor World is high. "Many customers spend \$300 to \$400 on wine, and then you won't see them for a while," Starr explains. This makes superior service—and the repeat business that comes along with it—all the more necessary.

Wine might seem to be a hard sell in Arkansas, but Starr maintains a philosophy that appeals to his open-minded clientele: Keep it simple. "I think stores can make wine very confusing," he explains. "Most customers are not interested in malolactic fermentation and other technical terms. You need to help your customers by breaking wine down and simplifying it. You need to be falling over yourself to give great service to that person."

Once Starr has made a sale, he asks customers to report how his suggestions scored. "I may help someone who's buying a bottle of red wine for the first time, so I have to listen to what he's saying and get it right," he explains. "If he's new to red wine and goes into a store that offers him a chewy Cabernet, it may scare him away. In that case, the store hasn't done him any favors."