

Back in Good Health

Once destroyed by fire, The Grist Mill has returned to serve health-food customers

By Jeanie Senior

When fire destroyed The Grist Mill—the health food store Isabel Cordis and her husband, Harley, had opened in 1985—Isabel announced her retirement.

She told an interviewer on the Goldendale radio station she did not intend to reopen the store.

“I just simply said, This is it,” recalls Isabel, now 85.

However, retirement did not seem to be in her future.

“Every time I’d go to town—to get groceries, to the post office—everytime I was seen on the streets anywhere, someone would jump me and beg me to reopen,” she says. “I got no rest, day or night.”

Finally, the couple got a call from the mayor of Goldendale.

Isabel says the mayor asked, “Listen, what can I do to get the people of the town off my back? I’m getting the message that you need to rebuild.”

He offered her a low-cost loan for the project.

Harley and Isabel first looked for a building to rent.

“Good gravy, you’d think you could find a building suitable,” she says. “We were just exasperated.”

Finally, they bowed to the inevitable and bought the former Realto Tavern on West Main Street. It reeked so strongly of decades of spilled beer and cigarette smoke they spent months gutting the building and putting in a new



Isabel Cordis, left, is the founder of The Grist Mill in Goldendale. Faye Fischer, right, now manages the store.

floor, ceiling and wiring.

“We just plain rebuilt the thing,” Isabel says.

They stripped the paneling on one wall and refinished the beautiful redwood they found underneath, they stocked new shelves, a cooler and a freezer, and reopened for business in the early 1990s.

They also repaid the loan.

Now, The Grist Mill—the only health food store in Klickitat County—has expanded its stock and its clientele.

Although still a partner in the business, Isabel is retired. She bowed out in 1999, when they learned Harley was terminally ill. He died in March 2001.

Their son Willard, and his wife, Ardy, took over operation of the store, but matters quickly grew more complicated when Willard’s health declined. He eventually got a pacemaker, but Isabel says it was not easy for two or three years.

Willard is better now, and Ardy

is working as a home health nurse for Klickitat County.

For the last five years, Faye Fischer of Appleton has managed The Grist Mill.

Mary Henry is the only other paid employee, but volunteers also help out, including bookkeeper Elaine Kubler.

The business has expanded.

In her first store, Isabel used two picnic tables and the tables’ four benches to display the wares. A lot of the original equipment was donated by area food cooperatives that were closing at the same time Isabel was opening her store. Many of the former co-op members became her customers.

“We had a grinding mill and we would make different flours,” she says. “There were different things that I would buy in bulk, like dried fruit. We’d get raisins in 30-pound boxes and put it in one-pound sacks.”

Harley, a long-haul trucker,

bought rice in bulk for repackaging.

Isabel started stocking food for diabetics and people with wheat allergies.

"That's what the people wanted," she says.

The grinder still is used. The Grist Mill sells fresh stone-ground bread flour made with a mix of hard red wheat and hard white wheat.

Faye says they regularly mill the flour for people who want to bake their own bread.

"I wish I could say the wheat comes from here in the Goldendale area, but what people grow here is soft wheat," says Faye.

She does get wheat from a local farmer to grind into whole-wheat pastry flour. The local wheat, with less gluten than hard wheat, is ideal for pastry making.

Faye also has used the grinder to make specialty flour for customers, using beans or rice, for example.

Isabel's original resolve—to provide customers what they want—continues.

"Many people are gluten intolerant," says Faye. "They can't use wheat gluten any more, so we carry rice pastas, other rice items, rice cereals. Rice Dream makes an excellent ice cream. We even have rice tortillas. Those bring in a lot of customers. People are so happy they can come here and find what they need.

"Our clientele keeps changing. Over the last five years, the business has grown at least double. I think it's because people are finding what they want here. I try to stock the store as though it were my pantry."

Faye says the increase in customers is due, in part, to an influx of newcomers to the Goldendale area.

She has increased the number of items sold at The Grist Mill, which is made easier by the growing num-



The women who make The Grist Mill successful are, from left, manager Faye Fischer, co-owner Ardy Cordis, store founder Isabel Cordis, bookkeeper Elaine Kubler and employee Mary Henry.

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**Faye Fischer
Manager,
The Grist Mill**

ber of distributors who handle natural and organic foods.

"Our goal is to have what people want when they walk in," Faye says. "When people ask for things, we try to keep alert to what they want. We do a lot of special orders. If something's not on the shelf, but it's available through our distributors, I would get it for them."

Faye ran a health food store and

juice bar in Hawaii 30 years ago.

At that time, "it was the younger generation that was buying health food," says Faye. "We didn't see very many of the older generation. Now I see people just across the board, young families as well as older retired people. Now, it's the gamut of ages. I think people are becoming more aware of their health, although there's still more education that needs to happen."

A wall freezer holds a wide range of items, from organic vegetarian dinners to meat substitutes and Rice Dream ice cream. There is a well-stocked cooler, bins of grains, rice, beans and other bulk foods, and medicinal and cooking herbs in bulk. Other shelves hold diet supplements, canned and dry foods, health and beauty items.

A library of books addressing health education—from the use of herbs for healing to cookbooks—is available for customers to use.

Faye says customers are now stocking up for the cold season.

"They're starting to think about winter pantries, so dried beans and soup mixes are real popular," she says.

Faye is a certified public accountant. She started at The Grist Mill as a volunteer in about 1998. She wanted her children, Andrew and Elizabeth, to experience working with the public.

Elizabeth, now 17, was so small at first she had to stand on a box to operate the cash register.

"Besides helping out, Elizabeth sometimes entertains customers when she practices on the piano at the back of the store," adds Elaine.

Faye says getting a job is not why she volunteered.

"But looking back, if I were to advise someone how to look for a job, I would say you might try volunteering," she concludes. ■