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Gainesville caterer ends up face to face with Mad Housewife

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Gainesville, FL - A new brand of wine has hit the shelves of Gainesville-area Publix Super Markets in the past two weeks, but the face on the label may appear to be an old friend.

That's Monica Albert mugging for you, wearing her pink 1950s fitted frock with strands of pearls and standing cheek-to-cheek with a spatula, eyebrow dramatically cocked, or gazing sultrily through her horn-rimmed cat eyeglasses.

Yes, the lady on the Mad Housewife chardonnay, merlot or cabernet sauvignon that is being marketed nationally is that Monica Albert - the 38-year-old co-owner/caterer at Gainesville's Olive You Eat Well, which she operates with her sister, Lita Giampola.

"The first time I saw this enormous display (of the wine) in Publix, with my face all over the place, I just wanted to turn around and walk out," she laughs. "But now I am flattered. It is such a hoot."

Albert is not the only Gainesville connection to the wines coming out of the new Rainier Wine of Bellevue, Wash.

One of its co-founders, Damian Davis, 41, is a 1986 University of Florida graduate. He was an electrical engineer who worked for various high-tech industries here and out West until in 1997, when he said he "decided to get into this crazy wine thing."

He flew out his old buddy Buster O'Connor, who owns EYE4, a Gainesville firm that creates corporate identities and specializes in marketing.

O'Connor said he lived in Davis' basement for three days while they brainstormed "for some fun things for branding." With the guidance and input from focus groups around the country - a lot of friends and co-workers of theirs, but also in large-scale surveys in 10 large metropolitan markets - they hit upon producing an affordable, good-tasting, grocery-store wine with women as its target audience.

"After all," O'Connor said, quoting recent research, "women buy about 80 percent and consume 60 percent of the wine in America."

O'Connor said the company took a lot of direction from Australian wines, notably the Yellow Tail, which brought a \$7 bottle with a cute label out from inside a brown paper bag and onto Ikea dinner tables around the country.

"We were blindsided by Australian wines," he said, and vintners reacted by creating a whole lot of what O'Connor dubbed "critter wines" - those with cutesy pictures, funky labels and twentysomething sayings.

The "mad housewife" concept may be confusing to some age brackets, most likely women who are middle-aged or older, O'Connor - who is 46 - said.

"There may be some disconnect for some groups, such as women in their 60s. The name could be too close to how they may have felt. But for the younger people, it's a parody. We drew from the popularity of the television show 'Desperate Housewives.'"

He said he and a friend, photographer Danny Lyons, met Albert while she was styling a food photography shoot about three years ago. When O'Connor was searching for stock photos from the Internet for wine label prototypes, he immediately thought of Albert, who does her own makeup and styling for the labels.

Davis and his partner, Mike Lynch, 44, rolled out Mad Housewife in the Pacific Northwest this spring. It came to Gainesville two weeks ago. The suggested retail price is less than \$10.

Rainier is technically a wine negociant - that is, it buys wine on the open market and works with suppliers to blend and ensure an annual consistency of price, quality and supply.

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AARON DAYE/The Gainesville Sun
Monica Albert, caterer/co-owner of Olive You Eat Well in Gainesville, poses Sunday with a bottle of the new Mad Housewife brand wines during the wines' launch at the Haile Marketplace Publix. Albert's face appears on the wine label.