

Guest Column: The Faces of Hospitality & Tourism

As you are probably aware, tourism is a top economic driver for San Juan County. Visitors “import” new dollars, which benefit small businesses, non-profits like museums and farmers markets, and residents as these dollars circulate throughout our island communities. This series of columns will help put faces to this industry – restauranteurs, innkeepers, shopkeepers, tour captains, and other entrepreneurs who make our communities so unique and vibrant.

Katie Sellers spent many years working in the food and beverage industry, which was a fast-paced and demanding environment that she thrived in. However, like many others, COVID-19 brought a period of uncertainty and reduced work opportunities. Seeking something more, she decided to go back to school and earn her MBA. This decision opened the door for Katie to transition into hospitality management, allowing her to leverage her past experience while embracing new challenges. She started at the Outlook Inn in Eastsound in 2021, directing food and beverage, and became the general manager in 2023.

Katie cherishes the slow pace of life on Orcas and the strong sense of community that permeates the island. She says, “Over the 14 years I’ve lived here, I’ve had the privilege of meeting some truly amazing people, especially the guests we have the pleasure of serving at Outlook Inn. The connections I’ve made with others that love this community as much as I do, and that we all collectively get to share it with others daily, is incredibly fulfilling.” She loves hearing from guests how they’ve been able to truly relax and connect with the people they’re traveling with. It’s rewarding to know that our environment fosters those meaningful connections. And, of course, it’s always great to hear how much they enjoy New Leaf Café! Outlook Inn just brought on a new executive chef to lead the culinary team at New Leaf as they continue to evolve and grow their exceptional dining experience.

How does tourism benefit the Islands?

Katie says, “There’s always something new to learn from the diversity of travelers from all over the world that visit Orcas Island. I think it’s fun to step into busy, bustling businesses where you can strike up a conversation with an interesting person or couple. There’s always something new to learn, a chance to share a laugh, and an opportunity to feel enriched by the experience. Just as people come to the islands to enrich their lives, they also have the power to enrich ours in return. I’m impressed with the Visitors Bureau’s ability to not only promote tourism but also emphasize sustainability. Their efforts in educating guests on how to be good stewards of the islands are commendable and crucial for preserving the natural beauty and community spirit of our area.”

In the hospitality industry, the cornerstone of the business is the team members who are here every day, welcoming guests and ensuring they have a memorable experience. One of the biggest challenges we face here in the San Juans is the lack of affordable housing causing housing insecurity. Outlook Inn has tried to address this by providing some temporary on-site housing for their team, but Katie loves learning and discussing ideas for growth, and is always inspired by anyone who wants to brainstorm and explore new possibilities. This sense of community—helping out our neighbors—has led us through uncharted waters before and will get us through again.