



SAVORING HIS SUCCESS

By Kate Savage / Photos by Lee Thomas

Former Thoroughbred trainer enjoying a
winning run as the owner of Wines on Vine



Burk Kessinger took a leap of **faith in** opening Wines on Vine 10 years ago.

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Most people would struggle to find a common theme among trading stocks, training horses, and owning a fine wine shop and bistro. But for Burk Kessinger the thread is his managing to master all three. Successful as a stockbroker and subsequently as a horse trainer, he is now enjoying a winning run as the owner of the popular restaurant and wine shop Wines on Vine.

Kentucky-born and -bred, Kessinger originally embarked on a career as a stockbroker for Hilliard Lyons, where both his sons work today. He eventually became involved in racing and breeding programs as investment opportunities. He put together partnerships with noted owner and breeder John Bell and his family, trainer Shug McGaughey, and others. Crediting his clients who trusted and believed in him, and his partner at

Hilliard Lyons who afforded him the opportunity to spend a lot of time at the racetrack, Kessinger started to fall in love with the horse business. Then one day he realized, "I'd really like to give horse training a shot."

Kessinger spent time around McGaughey's barn of 2-year-old Thoroughbreds in Lexington, watching and looking for a way into the business. His first opportunity was as a hotwalker for Rusty Arnold and then as a groom for Tom Upton.

"I was 32 when I started walking hots," Kessinger recalls with a chuckle, something he does a lot. "Yes, that was a very late start to the business."

His first real break came when Bob Murray of Merriek Inn gave him a horse, ironically named No Room at the Inn, to train. Kessinger remembers he had a terrible time getting the horse to do anything. "It was a very crazy horse," he said. But he gave the horse a lot of love and attention, and with Murray's encouragement entered the horse in what would be his and the horse's first race, a claiming contest. The horse ran third. McGaughey's horse won and trainer Bill Mott's was second. Kessinger tells this story with great relish, remembering how Murray then decided his horse might actually be really good after all and sent it back to the previous trainer. The horse never hit the board again.

After winning 11 stakes races at Keeneland, Kessinger realized he had done what he had set out to do. He had run at the highest levels — at Keeneland, Churchill Downs, and Saratoga — and now after years of the nomadic circus life, Kessinger felt he needed to come home.

At 52, with aging parents, three children whose earlier years he'd missed, and several grandchildren, Kessinger decided to retire as a trainer to spend more time with family. He left the horse business in April 2003.

Though too young to go to pasture, Kessinger had no clue what he would do next. He thought about going back to being a stockbroker but didn't really want to. He remembered the many trips he had made to Europe while training horses for owner/breeder John Muldoon, and how much he loved all the old wine stores and small pubs. He thought, "We need a European-style bistro in Lexington. We are a college-educated town, and there are a lot of well-traveled people. Wine is a growing thing from everything I've read."

Kessinger knew nothing about retail, wine, or the restaurant business. "As a horse trainer," he said, "you are a horse



Kessinger ensures a convivial atmosphere for his patrons.




trainer. There's no time for outside interests." But he had learned to enjoy wine, especially in Europe. He mentioned the idea of opening a wine shop to his son Tommy, who supported him, saying: "Well, Dad, you've got your IRA. If nothing else, invest it in yourself."

In the spirit of a true entrepreneur, Kessinger took a leap of faith and opened Wines on Vine in December 2003. Now more than 10 years later the wine shop offers more than 300 local and international wines, as well as a selection of beers.


In 2004 Kessinger expanded into an adjacent space and opened a restaurant, originally offering a limited lunch menu and deli carry-out. Today Wines on Vine is a full-service fine dining establishment. In August of last year, Kessinger opened The Tavern at the Wines on Vine, serving a less formal menu to a clientele looking for a more casual environment. The wine shop sits conveniently sandwiched between the two dining spaces. Kessinger remarks, sounding a little bemused, "The business went from just me to 20 employees."

However, in his magnanimous way Kessinger is quick to share the credit, citing much of his success to good fortune, good health, and his amazingly loyal staff.

Kessinger sees little difference between being a successful horse trainer or a successful restaurateur. "Without good staff ... without great staff, you're in trouble in both industries. My staff stays with me for a long time. In the horse business they had a passion for the backside. In the restaurant business they are passionate about service and the food product. It's just that simple. You win races, owners keep coming back to you. You serve good food and continue




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Above, Wines on Vine is buzzing on a late-winter evening. Below from left, entrees include steak au poivre, sautéed fish, and tequila chorizo mussels.

to make it a pleasant experience, diners will keep coming back.”

Even with all the right ingredients, challenges do arise as on one occasion when Kessinger and his manager had to jump behind the line to cook. “That was a strange night, I can honestly tell you. I am a good cook, and cooking for eight is fun, but cooking for 60 when 30 of them all come in at once ...”

And yet, when the seasoned restaurateur is asked whether he considers the business to be the hardest, Kessinger is quick to say no. Training horses is the hardest thing he has ever done but also the most rewarding and the most enjoyable. The food business is second.

“There is nothing harder or more stressful than being a horse trainer. You work every day of the year in a business where people can die, horses you’ve grown fond of can get hurt ... my worse day in the restaurant business

nobody dies or has to be put down.”

Wines on Vine has seen changes in its decade of business. The kitchen, originally equipped with a microwave, panini machine, and a plug-in heating ring, expanded over time to include a hooded, domestic-style stove and an electric fryer. “Most people who read *Keeneland* magazine have a better kitchen than the one we’ve had to put out 150 dinners every night,” Kessinger quipped.

Thanks to the recent addition and expertise of a new partner, Larry Adams, who owns a construction business, the kitchen has had a facelift and new commercial-styled equipment installed. The “back of the house” is visibly thrilled.

“We are one big happy family here,” said executive chef Matt Hughes. Sean Jump, who works by day at Amazon and does evening food prep at Wines on Vine, readily agrees: “We are a tag team here; there’s a lot of love in the job.” Pastry chef James Mark is eager to show off his fluffy cheese-cakes just appearing from the oven. “We prepare everything here from scratch,” he boasts. “Soups, desserts, sauces. We hand-cut our meat; we even make fresh pasta every day.”

Wines on Vine and The Tavern are unpretentious and welcoming. Kessinger likes it that way. “I like to think of this place as a family spot — a nice, quiet, comfortable spot ... good food for a fair price. No one is trying to impress.”

Customer Lawrence Wetherby, recently having a drink at the bar with his date, agreed. “It’s just like ‘Cheers’ here.” Noah Melgar, who was having dinner, confirmed. “We love it here. It’s off the beaten path. If you come here, it’s not something you’ll regret. I’ve heard that general consensus from others.”

Being off “the beaten path” and tucked away in the smattering of shops and businesses on Old Vine Street doesn’t seem to have created problems for Kessinger. Part of the secret of his success might be the various week-night events he has introduced to appeal to different crowds.

Tuesday night is Manicure and Martini night — a drink and a buff and polish for \$10. The event attracts 15 to 25 people every week, and Kessinger says the event is not just for women, proudly showing off his own nails. Wednesday is Wine, Women and Song with live music and all-night happy-hour drink prices for ladies. Thursday is Oyster Night, and Burk is especially proud of the fresh Chesapeake oysters from Lexington Seafood.

Fun is something that rates high for Kessinger, who evidently enjoys a



fair bit of it himself. “We are as big as we want to be,” he says. “I’d rather people come and stay as long as they want. We aren’t trying to turn the tables three times here. I want people to come, sit, have fun, be with their friends — there’s no rush here. Savor the evening.”

Having a wine shop certainly helps customers to savor the evening. Astute as a businessman even when having fun, Kessinger offers wines to diners at retail rather than restaurant prices every Saturday night. “A Jordan Cabernet that would cost \$110 in a restaurant elsewhere, I can sell to you for \$56. The money you save buys your dinner right there,” he says with pride. Weeknights he offers the same bargain to his customers but adds an \$8 corkage fee.

Kessinger acknowledges that Wines on Vine has been a labor of love. “When you are in a kitchen long enough, you’ve got all the little cuts and burn marks. When you are in the horse business, you’ve got all the kick and bite marks, but even so,” he says. “It’s all been fun.”

Asked if he plans to do this until he drops, he responds with a



Kessinger enjoys his role as a host.

laugh; “Probably. I don’t have anything else to do. I’ve enjoyed all three of my careers. I’ve been very fortunate. I hope we keep doing well here.”

All bets are on that he will. **KM**

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