

Peter Bessey

By Paul Prendergast
Photo Credit: Mark Wilson

Born in Boston, raised in Fiji and California, schooled on the fairways, wine bars and wine regions of Europe; settled on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, Australia.

'Homme d'Affairs' in Golf and Wine



When I moved to Australia, I quickly realised I couldn't make a lot of money caddying so I figured, let's see if I can do something in wine. Wine was always a hobby and a passion.

Peter Bessey



The story of Peter Bessey, 'Homme d'Affairs' at Fine Wine Merchant – the boutique wine shop he owns with partner Stewart Plant in Mt Eliza – and business manager for Ogilvy Clayton Golf Design is an interesting depiction of how life can provide great opportunity and diversity if you're prepared to chase it.

From a long line of descendants of Anthony Bessey, who migrated from England to Massachusetts in 1634 and was a farmer by occupation, Bessey

considers he may be 'the first Bessey to ever leave Boston' in 16 generations, although as you peel back the layers of his rich life story, you discover his brother coincidentally, also lives in Australia.

"My brother was in the computer business in the early days in L.A. and his company asked him to move out to Australia for a year in the 80s to help establish down here. He wasn't all that keen but he came down for a year and ended up at Manly in Sydney, about

a block from the beach. He quickly realised this was pretty good and never left."

So how did a boy from Boston end up immersed in golf and wine and setting down roots on the other side of the planet on the Mornington Peninsula?

"I met a young lady in Prague when I was caddying on the European Tour in the early 90s and that young lady is now my wife. I went back to caddying then arranged a bag in

Australia at the end of that year and met up with Veronica in Melbourne, where she was born and raised.

"I went back to Europe after that, then back to the States but we kept communicating and eventually I moved here permanently in 1995. We were married in 1997."

Bessey got involved in golf working in a pro shop and also working as a 'gopher' following the PGA Tour for a TV company, but his introduction to caddying came after

meeting Ernie Els in the early stages of the South African's career at the PGA Tour Qualifying School.

Els helped Bessey with some contacts to caddy in Europe and elsewhere for players like fellow New Englander Peter Teravainen and current Champions Tour star Michael Allen, however his second ever gig was filling in at a pro-am on five-time Major champion Nick Faldo's bag when his caddie Fanny Sunesson was injured.

"When I moved to Australia, I quickly realised I couldn't make a lot of money caddying so I figured, let's see if I can do something in wine. Wine was always a hobby and a passion.

"When I graduated from college, my father shouted me a trip to Champagne in France and then whenever I caddied in Europe, I'd try to drink in wine bars and drink local stuff while all the other caddies headed to the nearest Irish Pub.

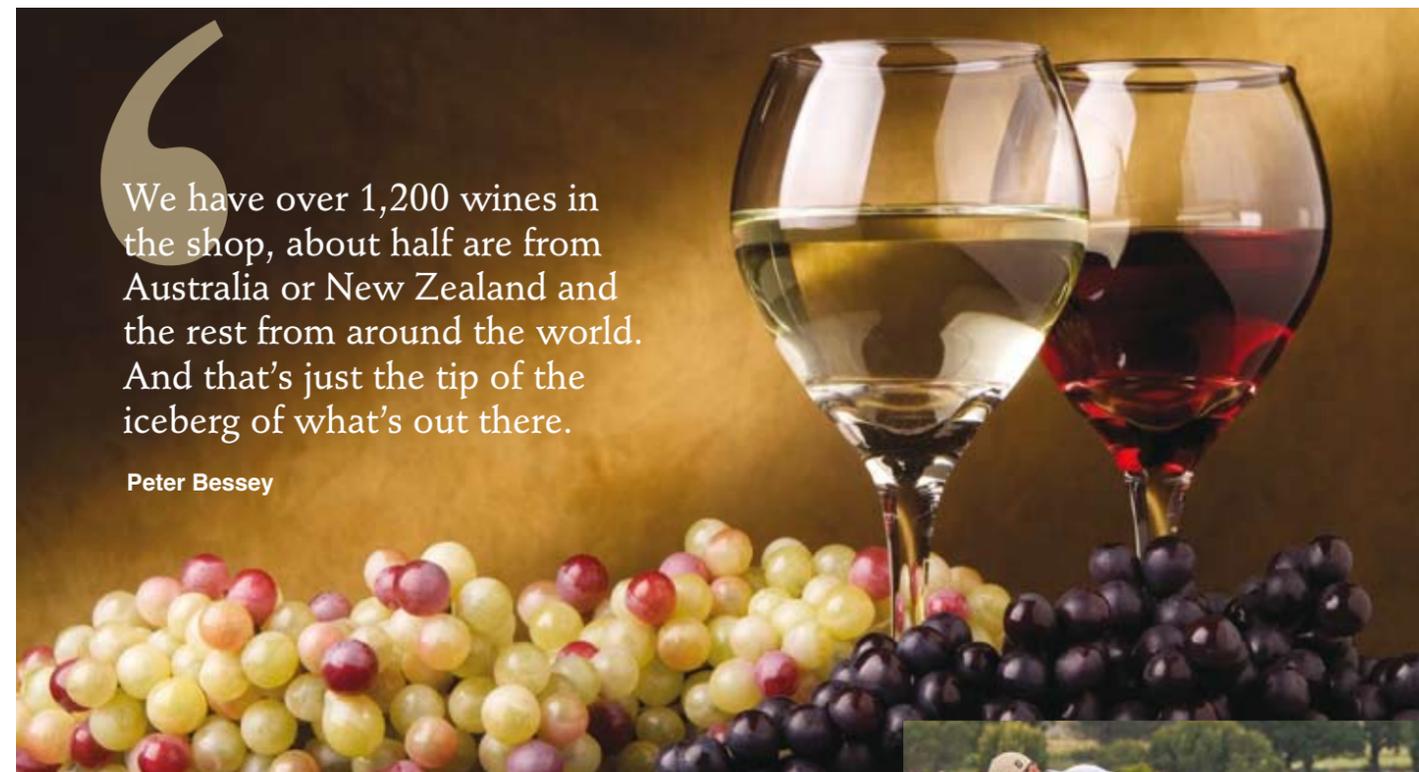
"Anyway, I saw an ad for a cellar door manager at Red Hill Estate on the Mornington Peninsula, borrowed a car and drove down there from Melbourne that day to taste the wines.

"I met the owner, the late Sir Peter Durham, the following Monday. He told me 'I'll let you know', so I did the old American trick and said 'I have two other job offers and I'm going to take one of them this week.' Of course, it was a bluff, so he asked me to take a walk in the garden for 15 minutes before offering me the job. I started the next week."

From there, Bessey was headhunted after about 12 months and was asked by veteran winemaker Ian Holm to 'follow him around' to learn the trade, with a view to one day taking over the business.

"I got some runs on the board there and never looked back in the wine business ever since. I'm not a

"I was a geeky kid in high school and college. Instead of turning up at a frat party with a warm six pack of Budweiser, I'd turn up with a California Chardonnay which didn't go down all that well with the frat brothers. I quickly made friends with a few like-minded people and we spent a lot of our parents' money buying champagne and pinot noir."



We have over 1,200 wines in the shop, about half are from Australia or New Zealand and the rest from around the world. And that's just the tip of the iceberg of what's out there.

Peter Bessey

qualified winemaker though, I have a financial background, a Degree in Economics, can read a profit and loss sheet, been around the wine market for a long time and had paid attention."

Bessey contributed to the business models, influenced vintage plans and wine portfolio decisions at a series of wineries and turned some struggling balance sheets into profitable businesses.

At a time when Bessey was running a small winery, golf course designer Mike Clayton made an approach to see if Bessey was interested in assisting his business, shortly before Clayton partnered with fellow Victorian and 2006 US Open champion Geoff Ogilvy to form Ogilvy Clayton Golf Design.

"I'd known Mike since my caddying days when he played on the European Tour and he'd taken me under his wing when I moved to Australia, introduced me to a lot of influential people and always included me in social events. We became friends and our wives became friends."

Bessey recalls his first meeting with Clayton at a tournament in Portugal; actually it was Clayton's putter he met first as it had landed near Bessey's feet when Clayton had dispatched it towards the scorer's tent from the 18th green.

"I tried unsuccessfully to give it back to him on two occasions but was told, in no uncertain terms, that he never wanted to see that putter again!" Bessey laughed.

While the business of Ogilvy Clayton dominates his time, the wine business continued to be an itch that needed scratching and an opportunity arose a little over a year ago to partner with Plant in a boutique wine enterprise. As Bessey says though, Fine Wine Merchant is located in Mt Eliza for one reason only – 'because this is where we live', but in a little over 12 months, healthy foot traffic, web and mail order patronage are ensuring their 'hobby' is paying its way.

"We have over 1,200 wines in the shop, about half are from Australia or New Zealand and the rest from around the world. And that's just the tip of the iceberg of what's out there."

Not only is it a pre-requisite that all wines are tasted before they find their way to the shelves at Fine Wine Merchant but chances are that Bessey has visited their region of origin and can wax lyrically on the terroir, wine making techniques, regional peculiarities of the grape and personalities in the area he calls friends.

Our group had a magical experience for several hours at



2006 US Open champion Geoff Ogilvy.

Fine Wine Merchant and almost literally went 'around the world', tasting wines from regions such as Chateauf-du-Pape and Rioja that we might not have had the good sense to have approached previously but now feel more intimately acquainted, thanks to Bessey's engaging and passionate guidance.

Peter Bessey has clearly listened carefully in his time, let alone taken full advantage of the rest of his senses as he cast his shadow over time in most corners of the globe.

Nor does his interesting life in golf and wine show any sign of slowing or becoming any more mundane into the future.

"It hasn't been dull so far," he laughed. ●