



... chances are that Peter 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.

Wine caddy

FROM CADDYING TO CHARDONNAY, FROM MASSACHUSETTS TO THE MORNINGTON PENINSULA ... IT'S BEEN AN INTERESTING JOURNEY FOR WINE MERCHANT PETER BESSEY.

WORDS PAUL PRENDERGAST PHOTOGRAPHY 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.

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 to Massachusetts in 1634 and was a farmer by occupation, Peter 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," Peter explains. "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 getting involved in golf and wine and setting down roots on the other side of the planet on the Mornington Peninsula?

"I was a geeky kid in high school and college," Peter explains. "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. But I quickly made friends with a few like-minded people and we spent a lot of our parents' money buying champagne and pinot noir.

"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 try local stuff while all the other caddies headed to the nearest Irish pub.

(How Bessey got into golf and caddying is a whole other story but consistent with the colourful nature of his life to date, his first caddy gig was with none other than South African Ernie Els and his second was with five-time major champion Nick Faldo!)

"I met a young lady named Veronica in Prague when I was caddying on the European Tour in the early 90s," Peter continues. "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 returned to Europe after that, then went back to the States but we kept communicating and eventually I moved here permanently in 1995. We were married in 1997.

"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 because it was always a hobby and a passion.

"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, but he asked me to take a walk in the garden for 15 minutes before offering me the job. I started the next week."

After about 12 months, Peter was headhunted and 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 I've never looked back in the wine business ever since," Peter says. "I'm not a qualified winemaker though, I have a financial background, a Degree in Economics, and can read a profit and loss sheet, but I've been around the wine market for a long time and have paid attention."

Peter 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.

He was running a small winery, when golf course designer Mike Clayton made an approach to see if he was interested in assisting his business. Shortly before, Mike had partnered with fellow Victorian and 2006 U.S. 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."

Peter 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 Mike 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!" Peter laughs.

While the business of Ogilvy Clayton dominates his time, the wine business continued to appeal, so when an opportunity arose a little over a year ago to partner with Stewart in a boutique wine enterprise Peter jumped at the chance.

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 1200 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 Peter 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 Fine Wine Merchant and almost literally went 'around the world', tasting wines from regions such as Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape and Rioja that we might not have approached previously but now feel more intimately acquainted with, thanks to Peter's engaging and passionate guidance.

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

And his interesting life in golf and wine doesn't show any sign of slowing or becoming any more mundane in the future.

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

golfplusmedia.com.au