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THEIR GLASS IS HALF-FULL

Wine sellers Bob and Kristen Kowalski struggled to be noticed after first opening in a new Mendota Heights development. But now their business is growing, and they're confident enough to be planning a second store in Woodbury.

BY GITA SITARAMIAH

Pioneer Press

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Trevor Howe was in a rut when he discovered The Wine Market more than a year ago.

"It was Chardonnay for under \$9.99. Period," said Howe, who lives in St. Paul's Highland Park.

Howe's come a long way in his wine knowledge since he became a regular Saturday patron, along with his French bulldog, Buffy, of the Mendota Heights retailer. He credits co-owner Kristen Kowalski for his transformation.

"She was very accommodating and got me to branch out," he said.

Now, he's expanded his repertoire of whites to sauvignon blanc, viognier and more and doesn't shy away from an occasional more expensive vintage.

Husband-and-wife co-owners Bob and Kristen Kowalski say they're trying to emphasize customer service with a personal touch in the wine shop they opened in October 2005. At the time, delivering that customer service was a bit tricky. The shop was the first to open in a development that was essentially a construction site.

Debuting under such circumstances was tough for the business, a situation that's gotten better since neighbors including E's Cheese and Caribou Coffee have opened. Bob Kowalski also unveiled the Sage Market deli and wine bar there.

Although more of the construction of the mixed-use development is complete, the Kowalskis still face the challenge of needing more customer traffic.

"A lot of people don't know we're here," he said.

Still they believe that the demand for a customer-friendly wine shop is strong in the south suburbs

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and that their location across the street from wealthy Sunfish Lake will help drive their business forward.

Kristen Kowalski wants to be the person customers ask to recommend a wine to go with a meal they're planning. Kowalski can choose from a selection of 1,700 labels and even prepares tasting notes.



Some of her customers prefer to leave all the work to her, such as one in particular who asks her to choose a case of different bottles for him monthly. "We give him some new, unique things to try," she said.

The Kowalskis are trying to offer something for everyone at their wine shop, from budget-minded shoppers looking for inexpensive wine to connoisseurs seeking hard-to-find vintages. They also sell beer and spirits.

The 2,633-square-foot space with Malaysian mahogany shelving and capacity for over 14,000 bottles of wine was designed to have wide aisles so customers could browse easily. "It cost us more to build it this way because it's not sales space, but we built it for the experience," he said. In back is a tasting room that can be booked for small parties.

Their top three sellers cost less than \$20, though some bottles go up to around \$200. Around a third

of their inventory is under \$12. "We wouldn't sell anything inexpensive unless we've tasted it and liked it," he said.

While Kristen Kowalski is finishing her certification to become a sommelier, or a specialist in tasting and serving wine, Bob Kowalski considers himself more similar to the average wine drinker. "I'm learning as I go," he said.

Although they're in a new development, they say their connections have helped to draw customers. "That kind of got us started, and the word of mouth helped us from there," he said.

Bob Kowalski is related to the family behind the Kowalski's grocery chain in the Twin Cities, where he worked his way up over 20 years to vice president of marketing until leaving in 2003 to work as a consultant in the food industry.

He has been able to spread the word about the wine market enough for sales to gross \$1.1 million last year. Those

sales are growing at a rate of 10 percent annually.

The husband-and-wife team have extensive business backgrounds. Since they'd each held six-figure paying jobs for years, they were able to launch the shop with savings and a loan using their home as collateral. Startup costs ran \$500,000 including the inventory and build out of the store.

She holds an MBA from the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management and has worked in sales positions for Kraft, General Mills and, most recently, Coca-Cola. The two met in 1995 when Kowalski's was one of her accounts while she was working for Kraft. They married in Florence, Italy, a few years later.

While he's responsible for marketing, she oversees store operations, from ordering wine to keeping the books.

They say launching the business together hasn't put a strain on their relationship because they respect each other's judgment, have similar tastes and share the same vision. In fact, they're planning to open a Woodbury location Oct. 1 in the Tamarack Hills shopping center.

There, they hope to have a bigger space with a larger tasting room and more beer and spirits.

"We think Woodbury will be great for us, with a high density of young professional people getting into wine," he said.

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COMPANY SPECS

Company: The Wine Market

Location: The Village at Mendota Heights, 720 Main St., Mendota Heights; 651-452-9463

Web Site: www.thewinemarket.us

Founded: Oct. 31, 2005

Owners: Co-founders Bob and Kristen Kowalski

Employees: Two full-time; two part-time

Annual Revenue: \$1.1 million

Competitors: Solo Vino in St. Paul, France 44 Wines Spirits in Minneapolis and Sam's in Minneapolis.

Challenge Ahead: Attracting more customers to their store in a new development while planning to open a second location.

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