

## BEHIND THE BAR

Skip Verchot

# Gil's Bar and Grill at the WilloughVale Inn

**"Everybody Likes to Talk to the Bartender"**

**W**hen Skip Verchot first stepped behind the bar on a warm spring night on Cape Cod, he discovered something about the job that he found particularly attractive.

It's stayed with him for more than 35 years.

"It's the interaction you get to have with people," says Verchot, now the innkeeper at the WilloughVale Inn and Cottages in Westmore. "Everybody likes to talk to the bartender. We all do."

Verchot values those conversations, especially working in an inn setting, where he could be outside shoveling the front walk or doing maintenance or running food – or behind the bar making a drink. It's one of the many skills that make him invaluable as an innkeeper. Because while his duties may vary throughout the day, Verchot quite often spends nights

mixing up cocktails for visitors to this Northeast Kingdom retreat at Gil's Bar and Grill – a cozy spot tucked inside the WilloughVale Inn.

Overlooking the pristine Lake Willoughby, this destination features traditional guest rooms, suites, lakefront cabins and a wide ranging roster of activities that make the most of its naturally dazzling location. The dining room, which includes a deck that provides even more unmatched views of the lake, can seat 50. Eight stools line the light wood bar, and additional seating makes space for up to 30 guests.

"With the large windows, it's very bright in here during the day," Verchot says. "And at night we have very nice lighting. With the light wood of the bar and the dark stools, it makes for a very nice contrast."

Verchot's time behind the bar started more than 35 years ago on Cape Cod. He

was spending his days landscaping and his nights bar-backing at The Impudent Oyster, in Chatham, Mass., when he got the call: He'd get behind the stick – that night.

"They threw me right in and it was great," Verchot says. "It was Springtime and people were down from Boston opening up their summer homes. I was slammed, but in retrospect it wasn't that busy. It allowed me to get more experience before the summer, when it gets really busy and interesting."

His career led him through Boston, Jay Peak, and eventually the WilloughVale Inn.

### What makes Gil's Bar and Grill at the WilloughVale Inn special?

"It's very cozy. It has a beautiful view of Lake Willoughby and it's very comfortable – very country. There are mirrors along the entire back of the bar that reflect back and look out onto the lake. There's a view of the lake from every seat."

### What's the philosophy of your bar program?

"We make the guests feel at home. It's important because a lot of them are staying right in the inn or one of the associated cottages. We make them feel comfortable and provide the best service possible with a smile. It's not rocket science, but to some people it is. You'd be surprised."

### Share a behind-the-bar secret.

"Reach out to people after you've taken their order and put the drink down. The classic up here is 'where are you from?' Just start a conversation. And the good thing is that it gets other people talking to each other. The next thing you know, your job is real easy. It goes back to when I was bartending on the Cape – it was a horseshoe shaped bar, and we'd have commercial fishermen in who might be sitting next to wealthy tourists who wanted to do some tuna fishing. They'd start talking to each other, buying each other drinks, and life would be good. It's always good to interact with people because people are always wondering about the area. When you can impart some knowledge to them, it makes them very comfortable."

### At the end of a shift, I...

"After we get done cleaning up and restocking, I have about a 30 mile drive home. It lets me reflect on the day, and by the time I get home I'm completely unwound."

**If you weren't a bartender, what would you be?**

"Do something in the golf industry. I play wherever they let me play – all over Vermont. We usually travel on Mondays and play in Orleans, Newport, St. Johnsbury, over in the Stowe area or over at Killington at Green Mountain National. They're all great courses and they're easy to get on."

**What advice would you give to aspiring bartenders?**

"Just watch and listen. When I was barbacking, I remember just watching. There were some really good bartenders I was breaking-in under so I watched and observed and asked a lot of questions – I was a sponge. I always defer to experience. If I sit at bar and have dinner with my wife, I'll order a glass of wine or whatever, and I'm always a student trying to watch and see what people do. There are a million ways to do things and you can learn a new way every time. As they say: you've got two ears and one mouth – listen more than you talk. And I have some wonderful staff here. They're learning from me, but I watch them and learn from them." ☺

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**Peregrine Punch**


- 1¼ ounces Bacardi Rum
- Pineapple juice
- Cranberry juice
- Orange juice
- 1¼ ounces Mount Gay Dark Rum

Mix the Bacardi Rum, pineapple juice, cranberry juice and orange juice into a shaker and shake well. Pour into a collins or hurricane glass, top with the Mount Gay Dark Rum and garnish with nutmeg, with a slice of orange, lime and a cherry.

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