



## Staying close to home

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### Luke Vaillancourt gives family business a new online identity

BY KEVIN KOCZWARA



The People's Kitchen in Worcester has an identity problem: It serves delicious food, prides itself on local, simple sounding, delicious and technically sound dishes as well as a great wine selection and comfortable atmosphere. The waiters wear vests and ties. They know how to hold, show and

pour wine. They know their food. They know their drinks. But the tables have brown paper over tablecloths, and for the price of the dish and the upscale vibe of it all, clean, cloth tablecloths are a must. There is no identity problem for Luke Vaillancourt.

He knows who he is and what he wants to do. He knows food. He loves food. And he is the reason why there is a group of 20 people in an otherwise empty restaurant on a Tuesday night, typically the slowest day of the week for restaurants.

I met Luke Vaillancourt and his Worcester Foodies group at the People's Kitchen, just above the Citizen, a wine, cheese and chocolate bar on October 4th . We ate and drank. I was there to talk with Vaillancourt, a 16th generation Suttonian, about his return to the family business, Vaillancourt Folk Art, Worcester Scene and moving back to Sutton after college.

The first time I heard about Luke Vaillancourt was when I took a tour of Sutton with his father Gary Vaillancourt in the spring. I just started working at the Chronicle and Gary offered to take me around town and to show me the history of Sutton. I asked him about his business and he mentioned his son, Luke, and his work at the company. He also mentioned how Luke turned down a job at Victoria's Secret in Manhattan to move back home. He mentioned Luke's work on the side of being Vaillancourt Folk Art's online whiz kid.

"It was at a time in my life that a lot of opportunities were opening up here [at Vaillancourt Folk Art], and I wanted to make a difference in the area," said Luke. "It would have been an awesome job [at Victoria's Secret], no doubt. But the job can only be as good as the environment around it and you never know how long that will last. So, I figured moving back to the area, being close to the family, and being close to a lot of opportunities here made a better fit. My friends still hate me for it, but what are you going to do?"

What was Vaillancourt going to do? He turned down any single, straightman's dream job. He turned down living in New York City to move closer to home. He turned down

living and working in the big-city, in a tall building filled with lingerie and models and advertising campaigns based on sexy and sleek. He turned that all down to work with his parents at Vaillancourt Folk Art, one of the only three Christmas collectible makers in the United States. He decided to work with Santa rather than Victoria's Secrets' models, twice.

"It was an extraordinary opportunity. When I turned down the job the first time they actually counter-offered and made me feel really good. It made me feel like I actually know something," said Vaillancourt. There is no doubt he loves his family's business with that kind of dedication.

"I love the fact that it's a small family business, so I have a lot invested in it. If it fails, I fail, my family fails. So, it's something you want to work hard and do," Viallancourt continued.

And he doesn't regret any of his decisions.

"I love cities. I love New York. I would have loved that, but I think things have worked out a little more favorably for me," said Vaillancourt.

Luke Vaillancourt joined the family business and revamped Vaillancourt Folk Art's online presence. He's created a site dedicated to the purchasing and selling of the collectibles, and an experience like going to the store and a resource for buyers and lovers of the chalkware pieces. He came into Vailancourt Folk Art and changed its online presence. And he's worked at keeping the company profitable and afloat during a time when the market for collectible Christmas pieces has crashed.

"An opportunity opened here, and I came in and hit the ground running," said Vaillancourt. "My first goal was taking a look at the website here and making it a lot more easy to use and making it a resource and not just a store. We wanted to make it an experience that kind of mirrored the experience of coming to the store."

Vaillancourt has been doing work with computers since he was in high school at Worcester Acadmy. As a senior, Vaillancourt worked with the technology department at the school to set up the network. He studied New Media Publishing at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, where he learned how to combine print design, online, and his IT background into one package.

He has taken that background to the family business and helped it survive during this tough economy. He started a few projects of his own, WorcesterScene.com and Worcester Foodies, when he returned to the area.

When Vaillancourt moved back to Sutton he was looking for places to go out and eat and meet people. He noticed something missing in the market: a hyper-local Internet database with all the information necessary for making a decision when going out. He decided to fill that void with WorcesterScene.

"When I first moved back to Worcester I was single and trying to find out what the hotspots were, and at the same time the restaurant scene and bar scene was picking up in the city," said Vaillancourt.

"There were a ton of restaurants opening, there was a ton of nightlife coming into play

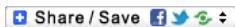
and it was contending with the Boston market and the smaller Providence market. So, when I was here I was always trying to find places around and there was no single resource to find restaurants, bars and simple things like phone numbers. When a restaurant opened up it wasn't immediately in the Yellow Pages or online. I wanted to create a directory – people have called it the Yellow pages on steroids – that is hyper-local and has all the pertinent information and is easy to find," he continued.

After WorcesterScene got off the ground and running smoothly, Vaillancourt decided to start Worcester Foodies, a group of people who meet on the first Tuesday of the month at a different restaurant. Each person orders a different dish and write a review. The reviews are then typed up and put online for other people to see and read while researching different restaurants in the area. The People's Kitchen was the ninth restaurant the group had met at. The group was started in the hopes of getting people out of the routine of going to the same restaurants time after time. The goal is to get people to experience new places with different people. And so far it's been successful. There is a waiting list of people trying to get in on the group, which usually ranges between 15 to 20 people depending on the location and capacity.

"I like food a lot. I very intrigued originally coming from a family business on the restaurant side of things. You have someone with such talent for creating food and then being able to put together a business plan of a restaurant: how it looks, how it operates," said Vaillancourt. "And I think that's how it started. Seeing how it's translated into a dish is even better. I love eating the food, but the experience of the atmosphere and how it translates into the food, that's what I think it's all about."

The atmosphere at The People's Kitchen was light, airy, and food centered. People tried new dishes, experienced wine pairings and were guided along a menu specially made for the group, not something the group usually does when it goes to a restaurant. Vaillancourt kept conversation moving with our table. He was interested in how everyone enjoyed the food and the wine. He was in his element eating and enjoying company. He was home.

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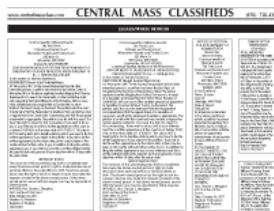
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