

Keeler's Bay Variety



**Store Manager
Wendy Horne**

PHOTO BY JENNIFER LYON-HORNE

Ask Wendy Horne what life was like before her family owned Keeler's Bay Variety, in South Hero, and she might have a difficult time describing it.

That's because the Horne family has owned this iconic store for 43 years — predating Wendy, the store's manager and one-day owner, by about three years.

"My parents were young, they were married and had my older sister Vanessa by that time," Wendy Horne says. "They were living in Burlington and one day they drove up to the islands. They saw the store, liked it and bought it. They decided that's what they wanted to do — run a store and raise a family."

In the ensuing four decades, the Horne family has ensconced itself as a South Hero fixture. A drive through this picturesque vacation spot isn't complete without a stop at Keeler's Bay Variety, which can provide everything from baked goods to meat to a wide assortment of spirits. In fact, a quick scan of online reviews praises the store's unique layout and variety of offerings, one likening stepping inside as entering "Vermont's own Platform 9¾" — a reference to a magical portal in the "Harry Potter" book series.

"It's such an interesting space," Horne says. "It's like a country store, only bigger. We have a deli and a meat department, a butcher, a bakery and a liquor store here. It looks bigger on the inside than it does from the outside. It's definitely an interesting structure."

Horne started working in the family store

in the summers during high school. She went away to college to study human services with a concentration in mental health and then began her career at a counseling and support services center in St. Albans. Through it all, the allure of South Hero remained strong.

"I decided to make a choice," she says. "I was 23, I had bought a house in Grand Isle and I knew I wanted to settle here from an early age. I liked the store business more than what I was doing so I decided to pick a path. I chose this."

For this mother of four, it was the customer service aspect of the daily routine that brought her back to the Route 2 spot.

"I love making people happy and doing what I can do to help," she says. "That's probably why I liked human services in general."

Over the years, she learned the back office side of things from her mother, Gail and the customer service side from her father, Mark.

"My dad is the front-end guy," she says. "Everybody knows him. He's the smiley guy at the front who will be there and do anything for anyone."

"I have this nice balance between knowing the office — I've been learning from my mom for 20 years — and I have the best of my dad because I love being at the front end and working with customers."

That combination has put Wendy Horne in the position of assuming ownership of the store in the coming years.

"I never thought it would lead to ownership," she says. "It's a great place to be, but I actually don't want to own the store because that means my parents won't be here and I don't



**Wendy's parents Mark and Gail Horne,
original owners of Keeler's Bay Variety**

PHOTO BY MATTHEW THORSEN

An Award-Winning Shopping Experience

Keelers Bay Variety was recognized as the 2017 Business of the Year by the Lake Champlain Islands Economic Development Corporation at its annual awards dinner at the Grand Isle Lake House.

"It was awesome when we found out," Wendy Horne says. "It's a big honor. We're from a wonderful community up here, which really sets it apart from anywhere else."

The store's renowned customer service helped it stand out, along with the family's involvement in the community and contributions to local nonprofits.

want that to ever happen."

In the meantime, the Hornes continue to greet every customer, offer a wide range of needs and play a vital role in the community — both locally and statewide. The store often hosts tastings in its liquor agency, and it stocks a range of Vermont-made products.

"We do carry quite a bit of the Vermont products," Wendy Horne says. "The Smugglers Notch line, the Barr Hill — which is probably our best seller."

Horne compares the attraction to locally-produced spirits to the booming craft beer movement. She says the shop's customers have a deep knowledge about what goes into each spirit, and an interest in how each ingredient affects the taste and makeup of the liquor.

"They're really passionate about it," she says. "They have a lot of knowledge."

The tastings are another of the community gatherings that engender a sense of loyalty to the store and bring customers back regularly. It also helps create a place where "everybody knows your name," according to Horne. Along with the regulars who may see her behind the counter on the way to (and then on their way home from) work, is a strong contingency of seasonal customers who return year after year.

"We live in the islands, but we're not out in them that much," she says, laughing. "My parents bought kayaks about 30 years ago and used them once. We enjoy summer inside the store. Customers say, 'Have a good day – hope you have a chance to enjoy it.' I always say, 'I am enjoying it.' I don't have to be outside the store to enjoy it. I wake up every morning and I can't wait to get to work." ☺

Keeler's Bay Variety
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