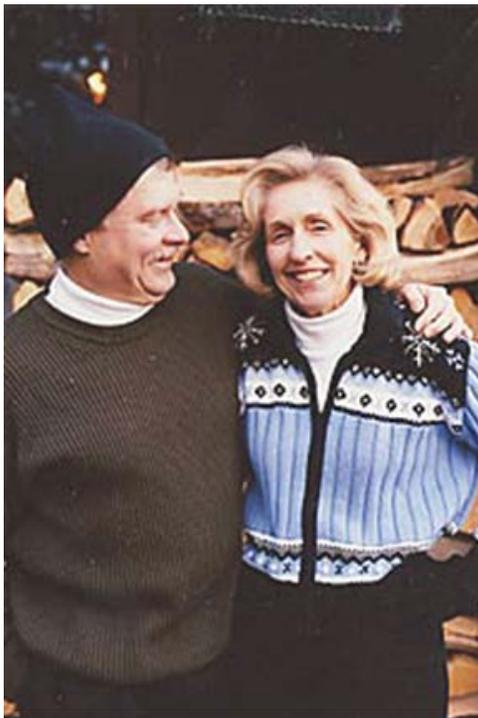




## Making it work: Inn Business

by David Healy, Contributor to SKI Magazine, January 2004



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA PAUL FOR SKI MAGAZINE

### BACK IN WHAT NOW SEEMS LIKE

a previous life, Bill Vines logged a pilot's share of frequent-flier miles working in international marketing for Motorola. "Like London for lunch," the 50-year-old Vines admits a little sheepishly. Today, airtime is registered on a more provincial scale: laps on the heated gondola that serves Vermont's 4,241-foot Killington Peak. It's a transport mode change the avid skier readily embraces.

"There's nothing like living in a ski town if you have the personality to do it," the outgoing Vines says from behind the bar at the Birch Ridge Inn, which he opened in 1997 with his life and business partner Mary Furlong. "It's a move that has really fit us," says Furlong, a slender blonde with a thick Boston accent.

"We're still type-A personalities, but we're A-minuses now. We drive a little slower, we talk a little slower, and we're much more polite than we used to be."

Engineers by trade, the affable pair made their move to the mountains from Boston's South Shore area with a characteristically well-calculated plan. "I want to give corporate America its due," says Furlong, an MBA and former quality-control manager for Ocean Spray. "We went through selection grids, brainstorming, all the tools of decision-making that we had used in our corporate lives."

Still, the inspiration came the old-fashioned way. "In a hot tub at Christmas with a bottle of wine," laughs Vines, a Killington devotee since his high school days in the 1960s. "We looked at each other and said, 'You know, we have to find a way to move here.'" Back home, each partner earned a six-figure income, but they were willing to swap pay for ski days and the Vermont life.

After filling their Killington ski house with a Wailing Wall of start-up business ideas jotted down on Post-it notes (consulting was pulled because "it would take us away from Killington" and a brew pub rejected because "Mary is a morning person"), they settled on running an inn, with a small restaurant, that caters to couples (children younger than 12 are not allowed). Advised by a consultant to buy an existing business and to avoid ski resorts, the pair did neither.

"It had to be Killington," says Vines, who now heads up the Killington Chamber of Commerce. "When we were doing our modeling it was, 'How can we make a living here?'" he says, conceding that with 9/11 and the economic downturn, it took every page of their "three- to five-year plan" to put the business in the black.

Choosing to launch a start-up in order to meet their requirement of being close to the slopes, the couple bought and renovated a former corporate ski retreat less than a mile from the lifts. They spent about \$350,000 to buy the property and put in another

\$550,000 to get it in shape. The retreat consists of four buildings on three acres, centered around a 10-room, 8,000-square-foot inn.

Guests enter the property through a classic Vermont covered carriageway, which leads to the dual A-frame lodge and restaurant. The property, however, hadn't been occupied for seven years. "It was straight out of the Addams Family," Vines recalls, still shaking his head at the spider webs and broken roof trusses that originally greeted them.

Undaunted, Vines and Furlong set out to create a romantic New England getaway that would draw skiers, leaf-peepers and other discerning travelers. Rooms range from the simple (\$80 in summer) to the sublime (\$275 for a king bed with a fireplace and whirlpool bath during winter holidays). The restaurant is decidedly upscale, attracting customers looking to rise above the frat-party atmosphere of the Killington access road. No one would have blamed them if they had retooled to chase the youth market (occupancy rates ran a paltry 6 percent the first year), but they stayed true to their vision.

"At the beginning we drank a lot of wine on the porch with the chef, waiting for someone to come," says Furlong. Slowly, the numbers turned around, thanks in large part to a 30-percent return-guest rate. Last season, the couple booked nearly a quarter of their rooms, and occupancy continues to climb 3 percent annually. Moreover, the couple seems to have worked out the challenges inherent to working with your life partner. The division of labor has Vines working the night shift, managing the restaurant and processing receipts at evening's end, while Furlong handles the morning crew and does cost-control analysis.

"We occasionally call each other names," the straight-shooting Furlong admits. "But by now I'd say we've

definitely come to grips with our strengths and weaknesses, and we've pretty much mastered the divide-and-conquer thing."

Despite Killington's ability to extend the ski season with aggressive snowmaking, Vines and Furlong have figured out a recreational calendar that works for them. "When they stop grooming, I stop skiing," says Furlong, who really does ski from Halloween to April before switching obsessions and heading to the fairways of Green Mountain National, located just a few minutes from the Birch Ridge Inn.

With the business finally turning a profit, you might expect the former executives to crow about their conquests. Instead, they focus on a different measure of success. "We joke about playing golf or skiing three days per week, but we continue to understand why we moved to Vermont and to take advantage of it," Vines says.

Coming from a guy who used to log 300,000 air miles annually, that sounds well-grounded. But then again, averaging 60-plus days riding the K1 gondola can have that effect.

#### Profile

**Name :** Bill Vines and Mary Furlong

**Age:** Bill 50, Mary 51

**Profession :** Innkeepers

**Personal:** Life and business partners; now hold meetings on ski lifts.

**Why Killington** "We're addicted to skiing, but the warm months hooked us. It's laid back, the mountains are gorgeous, and the golf is fantastic."

For more information about the Birch Ridge Inn at Killington, please contact :

Bill Vines - Mary Furlong  
Birch Ridge Inn  
37 Butler Road  
Killington, Vermont 05751  
Reservations: 800-435-8566  
Front Desk : 802-422-4293  
Fax: 802-422-3406  
Email: innkeepers@birchridge.com  
Website: www.birchridge.com

