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NEW CENTER SPOTLIGHT

A VERMONT INN WITH AN UNUSUAL AMENITY

After a day on the slopes of Stowe, skiers can now get their bowl on.

BY BOB JOHNSON

WHILE HIKING, hunting, golfing and ice skating are among the sports that locals and tourists enjoy in and around Stowe, the bucolic Vermont town will always be known primarily for its world-class skiing. In fact, situated on the ridgeline of Mount Mansfield, Stowe has been called the “Ski Capital of the East Coast.”

But as of Feb. 3, there’s a new sport in Stowe: bowling. The eight-lane installation is part of the Sun & Ski Inn and Suites, an inn that opened in 1971 and recently completed a major renovation.

Mark Vandenberg and his wife got married in 2009 and acquired the property from his wife’s parents a few years later.

“We knew the business as it was at the time wasn’t sustainable,” Vandenberg says. “We knew we had to do something to modernize it and grow it. At a strategic level, my in-laws are still involved, but operationally, it’s my wife and me.”

How did bowling become part of the project, which also added 14 guest

rooms for a total of 39?

“I come from the Meadowlands, where bungalow parks are popular,” Vandenberg explains. Bungalow parks typically consist of a series of bungalows that families can rent, surrounding various shared recreational amenities such as swimming pools, water slides and tennis courts. Some even include bowling lanes. “When we started the project, we were thinking of the bowling lanes as an amenity — something different that guests of our inn could enjoy,” Vandenberg adds.

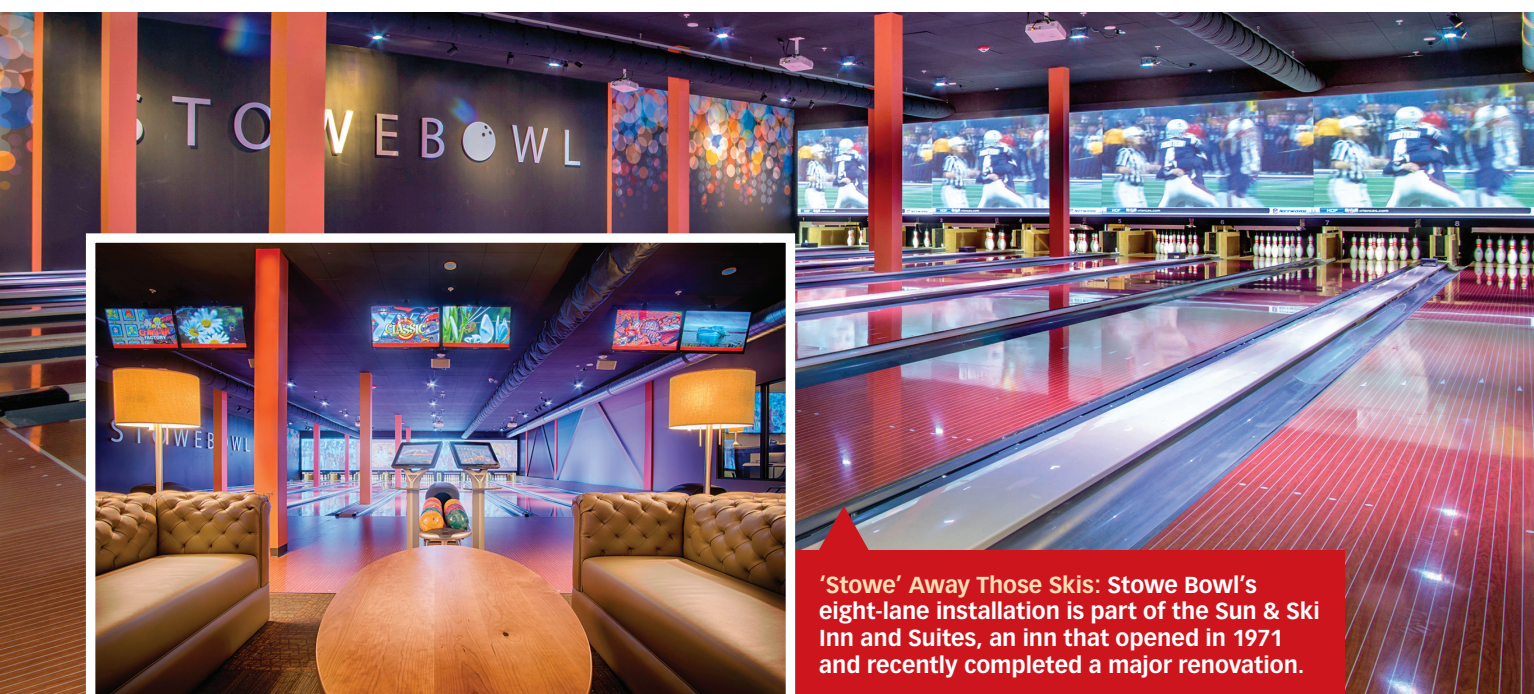
But as they began the research phase, they learned that a good number of small, upscale bowling facilities were popping up all over the country.

“We took a look at them, and some were really inspirational,” Vandenberg says. “Eventually, we began to realize that bowling could be more than an amenity; it could be a profit center of its own.”

Not only *could* it be, but it *needed* to be, given the seasonal nature of the area.

In the non-winter months, Stowe survives on festivals and other special events, but they don’t keep the local inns filled to capacity at all times.

“When our guests would ask for someplace to go that’s indoors, we could



tell them about some of the local restaurants or bars or maybe a movie theater, but that was about it,” Vandenberg says. “Now, we’ve given them something they can do right here, and in a very welcoming, fun environment.”

Stowe Bowl features eight cherry-colored lanes and what Vandenberg describes as a “spectacular audio-visual component.” From a design standpoint,

and Mac’n 3 Cheese (creamy cheese sauce baked with cellentani noodles and topped with herb panko; \$8).

There also are salads, burgers, sandwiches, flatbreads and desserts. Those with a sweet tooth must choose from among the Hot Blueberry Turnover (with vanilla ice cream; \$6), the Ice Cream Sandwich (chocolate chip cookies and mint chocolate chip ice cream; \$6), and

game pricing is available during slow times, but so far, according to Vandenberg, the place has been buzzing.

“Business has been way over our projections so far,” he says. “But we know we can’t depend just on guests of the inn; we have to draw in local residents, and Stowe is a very small town.”

To lure locals during the off-season months, Vandenberg says he plans to

BUILDING THE BOWL

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Summertime Suds: If the lanes don’t keep locals occupied during non-winter months in a skier’s town, the upscale bar will.



he says, “We were going for a mid-century modern ’50s look. The functionality doesn’t differ, but it looks really cool.”

Like similar facilities, food and drinks play a big role in Stowe Bowl’s business plan. There’s bar seating for 14 and about a hundred seats for dining, including those adjacent to the lanes. The menu features an array of shared plates, appetizers and bowls. As Vandenberg puts it, “It’s not your sloppy pizza or fried food.”

The “House Popcorn” (\$6) is seasoned with shaved asiago cheese, truffle oil and sea salt. The Indonesian Chicken Satay (\$11) features grilled chicken skewers, roasted peanuts, peanut dipping sauce and pickled cucumbers. Bitterballen (\$10) are Dutch beef-based fritters served with spicy Dijon mustard.

Among the five bowls at the bowl are Red Thai Noodle (rice noodles with pulled chicken, red Thai chili, cilantro, coconut milk and chicken broth; \$9),



Going Mod: “We were going for a mid-century modern ’50s look. The functionality doesn’t differ, but it looks really cool,” owner, Mark Vandenberg, says of Stowe Bowl’s design.

the Vermont Maple Ice Cheesecake (with whipped cream; \$8). What would a restaurant menu in Vermont be without “maple something” on it?

Bowling rates range from \$30 to \$40 per hour per lane, depending on the time of day and day of the week. By-the-

organize short-season leagues.

“A lot is still unknown,” he says. “Until we’ve had a full year of operation, we won’t know exactly what we’ll be doing from season to season. We may end up offering some packages — an hour of bowling with a weekend stay; that sort of thing.”

Meanwhile, Vandenberg is basking in

the glow of multi-hour waits for lanes, which motivate guests to visit the bar and restaurant.

“We’ve provided Stowe with something unique,” he says, “and we couldn’t be happier with the reception we’ve received so far.”