

Vinumport celebrates 10th anniversary

It was ten years ago that Tom Pillsworth purchased Vinumport Duty Free and made the US northern land border duty free stores his own, with a unique blend of wines and liquors that he says has a particular appeal for Canadian customers.

Pillsworth, who worked for decades as a supplier of wines and spirits, first opened shop on May 30, 2009 after buying the stores on the northeastern U.S.-Canadian border. "The way I got into the business is simple," Pillsworth said in an exclusive interview with *Americas Duty Free*. "I was trying to sell wine to the owner of a chain of duty free wine stores, and every time I tried to sell him wine he tried to sell me his stores."

The previous owner didn't want to sell his business to any of the larger retailers, and finally convinced Pillsworth to take over his business. "He ended up retiring at age 65, and I took over the stores. And even though this was a number of years ago, I am still the new kid on the block," Pillsworth said.

Rough start

Starting out wasn't easy, Pillsworth said. Many suppliers wouldn't sell to him at first, and initially he actually had to buy stock from his competitors. "There was definitely a learning curve," he said. "Where do I buy products? Where do I buy anything? The supply channels are completely different."

Vinumport has six locations, which are small- to medium-size land border shops from the Vermont border to the top of New York State. The stores are in Champlain, Rouses Point, Mooers, Chateaugay, Constable and Fort Convington. Most of the stores' customers are Canadians visiting the northeastern United States.

As the name suggests, Vinumport is mostly about wines and spirits, Pillsworth said, and that has remained his focus. His goal was to carry products that others didn't have, and offer a selection that was a little more varied.

Expanding the market

"My goal was to have 100 single malt selections," he said. "Bourbons, scotches, whiskey. I wanted a niche market for that."

Pillsworth, who says he spends a lot of time in his stores, prides himself on being able to "hand sell" wine. "I wanted wines from around the world but they are not necessarily the generic global brands.

He said in his stores, customers can "find a great bottle of wine even if they don't recognize the label. They are used to what they see in Quebec and then when they visit the U.S., they see U.S.-centric brands.

"They come down looking for something different that they can bring back," he said. And that's what they find at Vinumport Duty Free. "My stores are a gatekeeper to Canada," he said. "If I can get a larger number of my costumers bringing something into Canada, that raises the possibility that buyers there will start buying something different."

Now Pillsworth is looking ahead to small- to mid-sized regional airport opportunities. He's also exploring the possibility of selling duty free items on the Amtrak train between New York and Montreal.

But for now, he is still all about Vinumport Duty Free, and if you are traveling by land between the northeastern United States and Canada this summer, a stop at Vinumport should be on your places-to-visit list.