



Fall 2012

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Recommended Citation

Travis '11, Nicole and Obermiller, Tim, "Turning the Tables" (2012). *News and Events*. 1959.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1959>

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Turning the Tables

Hard work and an unbeatable formula for success help three Wesleyan friends-turned-partners make their mark on Chicago's competitive dining scene.

Story by NICOLE TRAVIS '11 & TIM OBERMILLER

Things are rolling these days for Bottleneck Management Group, owned and operated by three former Illinois Wesleyan students, Titan football players and fraternity brothers: Chris Bisaillon '93, Jason Akemann '96 and Nate Hilding '96.

In March, they opened Old Town Pour House, a spacious, upscale bar and restaurant in one of Chicago's most vibrant entertainment districts. It is Bottleneck's fourth restaurant. They also operate Sweetwater Tavern & Grille on Michigan Avenue in the West Loop, The Boundary in the Wicker Park neighborhood and South Branch Tavern & Grille. Recently listed by the *Chicago Tribune* as one of the city's "5 Hottest Outdoor Places," South Branch features floor-to-ceiling views of the Chicago River and a 4,000-square-foot patio complete with a glass pavilion bar and retractable walls.

Next spring, the IWU friends will open a new, 17,300-square-foot location in the ground floor of Tribune Tower on Michigan Avenue, a hugely ambitious undertaking for three guys who are fairly new to the restaurant game. Akemann and Hilding opened Trace, a bar in Chicago's Wrigleyville neighborhood, in 2001. The Boundary, their first restaurant, was launched in 2007, shortly after Bisaillon joined Bottleneck, bringing 19 years of experience at an investment firm and a corporate dynamic to a small company that was ready to grow.

The sudden rise in success hasn't gone to their heads, say friends and colleagues who have worked closely with the three. Realtor David Stone, who represented Bottleneck in its Tribune Tower lease, described them to *Chicago Real Estate Daily* as "solid guys with no attitude. Restaurant people often have tremendous egos, especially successful ones — and these guys don't."

What Akemann, Bisaillon and Hilding do have is an uncanny instinct for creating high-energy, approachable restaurants in dynamic locations with upscale-style food and service at affordable prices. It's a recipe for success that has Bottleneck's restaurants flourishing during a time when many Americans have cut back on dining out.



Among the friends' successful ventures is Sweetwater, opened in 2009 at a former Bennigan's on Michigan Avenue.



Before they were business partners, Bisaillon, Akemann, and Hilding knew each other simply as good friends with a long history.

Indeed, strange as it sounds, the economic downturn that put a major hurt on the hospitality industry in recent years actually helped Bottleneck grow. "It allowed three guys like ourselves to get numerous premier locations, because the big boys were in retract mode," says Bisaillon. The recession also lowered rents, making those choice locations more affordable.

"This was a Bennigan's," Bisaillon says, sitting with his partners in one of the comfortable leather booths at Sweetwater, which they opened in 2009. He motions with his hand past the stone-stacked walls and columns, toward the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Outside, the Michigan Avenue sidewalk bustles with tourists and working professionals. Just blocks from the theater district and Art Institute and within walking distance of most downtown hotels, this is

real estate at its most prime.

"The reason that we have it is that Bennigan's went bankrupt on a corporate level," Bisailon continues, "so it allowed us to sneak in and have a legitimate shot to acquire a premier location, which we ultimately did."

There was a downside for Bottleneck: The recession left the company with little or no financing, which the partners had previously combined with investors to fund their activity.

"It forced us to go mostly with investors and capitalize a project in a different way. That also proved to be a tactic that a lot of restaurateurs weren't able to use," Bisailon explains.

Once the trio got rolling with this new business plan and found success in Sweetwater, it was just a matter of deciding where to go next. "Sweetwater allowed us to get South Branch, South Branch allowed us to get Old Town, all three of them allowed us to get the Tribune Tower. So without that recession, I don't think we'd be anywhere near where we are today."

"We started in times that were tough and we already feel like we've succeeded where we are now," Akemann says. "We can't imagine what it would be like when everybody's working again and everybody feels good about the economy."

Finding the right balance ... and beer

Finding the right locations for their venues has been central to Bottleneck's success, Hilding says. "Location: that's what we base all of our places off of."

"I think too many times people in our business have an idea of a place before they actually find it," says Akemann. "So they want to build a certain type of establishment before they find the location and decide what type of place actually *should* go there."

"We've looked at a lot of locations that were really good locations, but that just weren't right for us," Bisailon adds. "They'd be better for a French restaurant or a steakhouse or a white tablecloth. We ask, 'Can we see our concept, what we're good at, working here?' And if not we walk away."

A *Chicago Sun-Times* review of South Branch sums another key to Bottleneck's broad appeal and ability to attract repeat customers. "This is not fine dining (the prices are too reasonable to slot it there), though the dining is low-key fine."

"They have food that's not cheap and not expensive, which is a tough balance," says realtor David Stone. Another plus: "They always design a sense of place where you feel like you're in a happening restaurant or bar."

In creating restaurants' décor and menus, Bisailon says their criteria will continue to be: "Is this a place where we and our families would like to go?"

"I will say that the president of a company will feel just as comfortable as his secretary will at our places, and that's on purpose," Akemann says. "Because honestly, we'll see a secretary more often than we'll see a president."

For their latest opening, Old Town Pour House, the partners set up on a stretch of Wells Street packed with bars and restaurants. To stand out, they designed an elegant but inviting space, featuring floor-to-ceiling mahogany millwork and a refined menu of



Akemann checks in with one of Bottleneck's 385 employees.

modern American cuisine. Pour House also offers one of the largest craft beer selection of drafts in the city. Among the more than 90 beers on tap are such off-the-path choices as Jolly Pumpkin Madrugada Obscura Dark Dawn Stout.

“Some people have negative feelings about draft beer, and that’s changing as more draft beers come into the market,” says Hilding, pointing to the growing interest in “draft barring” in Chicago, which has been trending on both coasts. “We have no bottles, we have no cans, and that’s a leaping-off point.”

Taking all of these features into account, Bisaillon describes the Pour House location as the easiest for Bottleneck to differentiate.

“Don’t let Chris fool you,” Akemann cuts in. “It’s the TVs.”

“There are some awesome TVs there,” Hilding agrees, referring to the massive flat-screens that line the upper bar.

“Again, I think it’s a great situation where the three of us lifted a wonderful room that felt great even before we laid our hands on it on a street that we could tell was just ready to become the next thing in this town,” Akemann says. “We put our stamp on that room.”

The lure to be entrepreneurs

Before they were business partners, Akemann, Bisaillon and Hilding knew each other simply as good friends with a long history.

Bisaillon and Hilding met in grade school, growing up in the small, rural town of Herscher, south of Chicago. Akemann entered the picture at Illinois Wesleyan, where the three belonged to Phi Gamma Delta fraternity and the varsity Titans football team. Hilding, a business administration major, earned the title of offensive MVP. Bisaillon, who double-majored in business and economics, broke Jerry Rice’s NCAA all-divisions record for career touchdown receptions (see [related story](#)).



Outdoor seating at The Boundary is a popular feature shared by many Bottleneck venues.

After two years at IWU, Akemann transferred to Illinois State University, where he earned his education degree. He then became a teacher while Bisaillon and Hilding launched business careers.

It was Akemann and Hilding who first felt the pull to try something different. Restaurants were in Akemann’s blood; his father and uncle opened Buttermen’s, a converted mansion, in Elgin, Ill., in the 1970s. But Akemann only wanted to supplement his teaching salary when he began waiting tables and bartending at Chicago’s famed John Barleycorn tavern.

Hilding — who had been working with Bisaillon at Van Kampen American Capital — decided he wanted to switch to the service industry and began bartending with Akemann at Barleycorn. When Akemann left teaching to serve

as general manager for a second Barleycorn location, Hilding followed and the two began to learn the ropes of operating a bar with a plan to launch their own one day.

Built with the help of a few friends and self-financed Home Depot and Menards hauls, Trace opened its doors in Wrigleyville (home of the Chicago Cubs) in 2001. At first, says Akemann, their goal was simply not to fail.

“I think that, especially in the early years, it really was the power of personality,” he says. “We didn’t have much except ourselves, and we were there all the time.”

Trace sought to separate itself from the stigma of a Wrigleyville bar while offering patrons “a fair price for a fair product,” Akemann says. “We spent every day there for six years before we were able to expand.”

That’s when Bisailon came into the picture.

“Ultimately I was always an entrepreneur at heart,” says Bisailon. “I’d opened several other businesses and was looking for a way to be my own boss with my own team, and these guys had been awesome teammates.”

Opening their first restaurant, The Boundary, in 2007, the trio’s respective roles as managing partners began to fall into place.

As managing partners, “I think we’ve divided up our roles in fairly complementary ways,” says Bisailon. If Bottleneck had corporate officer titles, Akemann would be chief operating officer. “So if it involves design of a restaurant, setup of the kitchen, how exactly the table is set — anything that has operation behind it is in Jason’s purview.”

Hilding oversees the accounting side of the business, such as payroll, human, banking and licensing matters. Bisailon says he focuses on investor relations “and other professional relationships, such as our real-estate folks, our landlords and our attorney.”

“The thing that’s pretty unique and pretty awesome as well is we do have these buckets that we fall into, but if something happened to one of us tomorrow, the other two could pick up the pieces like that,” says Hilding, snapping his fingers. “We might not do it the same way but could easily adapt.”

One thing that’s remained constant is the solid friendship behind their partnership. Hanging out together, the three can still summon the relaxed vibe they felt in college when they haunted Spanky’s Pub in Normal.

“I think it’s an apartment complex now,” Akemann says with a laugh.

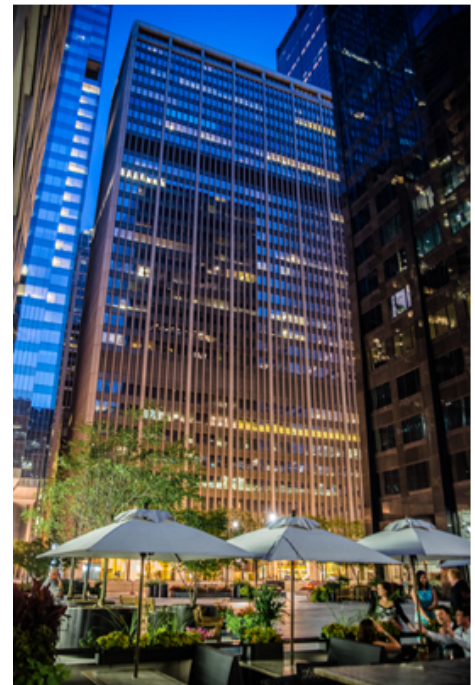
Nathan’s brother Matt Hilding ’00 says it is their friendship that drives the partners’ business success. “You see so many partnerships like those break apart because individual egos get in the way of each other. But they’ve been together through college and growing up together. And they’ve gotten to know and respect each other’s personalities so that they never let any type of disagreement get in the way of their friendship coming first.”

That sense of mutual respect is shared with Bottleneck’s 385 employees. “I don’t feel like we have people who work for us,” says Bisailon. “I think we have people who work with us.”

Indeed, several members of the company’s upper management got their start as bartenders, as Hilding and Akemann did before opening Trace.

“I think you’re only as good as the people you have preparing the food, serving the food, who are knowledgeable about the service and running your restaurants,” says Akemann. “If they aren’t believing in you, there’s no way they’re going to believe in the concept, and that will show through in any restaurant you go into.”

Chris’s brother Craig Bisailon, who graduated from IWU in 2000, says: “They’re very loyal, whether it’s to their employees, to their customers, to their family or friends. I think that really drives their business relationships and makes them as



Another of the friends’ successful ventures is South Branch, along the Chicago River.

successful as they are. People enjoy working for them and being around them.”

What doesn't drive them, they say, is any sense of celebrity of the kind that many restaurant owners' seem to court.

“I think one of our favorite things about being in our places is we're all sitting here having an interview with you, and there's no one in this place who knows who we are. No one. And we love that,” Akemann says. “But everyone in here is feeling how we feel about the place. The food, what's on the screens, what you're sitting on, what you're about to eat, what your drink options are. Our personalities come through not through us promoting ourselves or trying to be celebrities. I think we let our places be the celebrities.”

It's not ego that drives the Bottleneck partners to take on new challenges but rather the fact that “we're building futures for not only ourselves and our families, but theirs as well,” says Hilding, who is married to Jennifer (Goggin) '97. “I think that's pretty awesome.”

When Bottleneck Management originally set out to expand, the three partners had a loose goal of reaching eight to 10 locations at a pace of one new opening every 18 months or so. While they've stuck to that pace so far, the trio says the magnitude of the upcoming Tribune Tower location may be a game-changer.

“I don't think that there's a better gateway to the entire city than the Tribune Tower and Wrigley Building,” says Bisailon, and that's why this is one opportunity they couldn't pass up. Bottleneck's lease is for the 17,300-square-feet of ground-level space in the iconic 34-story tower, built in 1924. There will also be room for outdoor seating adjacent to the Pioneer Court plaza, near the junction of the Chicago River and Michigan Avenue. Expected to employ 150 people, the restaurant will open in the spring.

When it opens, the three friends will be busier than ever. Even now, they often work 80-hour weeks and, with their venues open every day except Easter and Christmas, there's little time for breaks. According to Bisailon, their growing families “are completely supportive.” Akemann and his wife Jenny have an infant daughter. Bisailon and wife Amy have two children, while the Hildings had their third child this year.

If you ask any of the three to name their greatest accomplishments, they will say, “Family.” But it's also clear they get a lot of satisfaction, and just plain fun, out of being “purveyors of good times” for their thousands of satisfied customers.

“We've created something that I hope will be around for my kids and his kids and his kids,” says Bisailon, pointing to his partners and friends, “to have something to build a career off of and hopefully further their life goals.

“I think the thing that I'm most hopeful for is that this will be here three decades from now and that we'll have family involved and they'll be able to take it to the next level.”

Asked what that next level might be, Akemann responds with a shrug and a smile. “Who knows what the next step is? That's been the fun thing so far.”

[CLICK HERE TO READ ABOUT BISAILLON'S TITAN FOOTBALL YEARS.](#)