



# Paul Coulombe

## worked hard for his money

*"It's all about hard work and tenacity, and never giving up."*

By SUZI THAYER

Paul Coulombe came to the Boothbay area with \$635 million after selling a vodka company. Since 2007, he has built a luxurious home on Southport, an upscale golf course in Boothbay, and the Oceanside Golf Resort in Boothbay Harbor.

Everyone around Boothbay and Maine knows Coulombe is rich, but he didn't simply inherit a family vodka company to get there. It has taken him over 30 years of hard work, and he's showing no signs of stopping now.

When he was growing up in Lewiston in a middle-class French Canadian family, Coulombe's parents would load him and his three siblings into an old station wagon and head to Fisherman's Wharf in Boothbay Harbor. His father loved the ocean and Boothbay Harbor was one of his favorite places.

"It was a big deal to us," Coulombe said. "We'd have a lobster roll and go home."

In 1971, his father, Raymond, was employed at Bates manufacturing, a textile mill, when he bought a small business called White Rock Distilleries. He started bottling and selling liquors and wines, including one called Italian Swiss Colony. "It smelled as horrific as it tasted, but it was the number one selling wine in the United States at the time," Coulombe said.

Coulombe's mother did the paperwork. A part-time employee helped fill the bottles with a spigot and put the caps on, all by hand.

In the early '70s, while attending the University of Maine at Orono, Coulombe came to Boothbay Harbor for weekends with friends. A favorite hangout was Rocktide, where a fraternity brother was head bartender. "We had no money, and we thought the bar was really cool and upscale. I felt lucky to be sitting there.

"It was 50 bucks for a room at Spruce Point Inn so we'd all pitch in and share it. If we pitched in five bucks we'd sleep on the floor. Ten bucks would buy you a bed."

After graduating in 1975, Coulombe, then 22, began working in the family business as an independent agent-salesman in Columbus, Ohio. "My father paid me so much per case for the cases I sold."

In 1987, Coulombe developed the business's first national brand. He called it Maui Schnapps. "It tasted and looked like Hawaiian Punch, and I called it Maui because I knew putting Lewiston on the label wouldn't work," he said, laughing.

Then he dreamed up another business venture selling what he called "bad beer." He bought 50 cases at a time for \$2 a case and hired a friend with a small plane to fly over Saturday football games at Ohio State University towing a banner advertising the beer. He paid his friend



Paul Coulombe tests his wife Giselaine's "famous red sauce" at their home on Southport.

Courtesy of Russ Armstrong

10 cases of bad beer to fly the banner. It was a hit.

Coulombe said his business sense came out of necessity.

"My father was a tough guy and a disciplinarian, and he didn't give me much to work with. I didn't have much money. It makes you hungry if you have nothing."

After becoming something of a success in Ohio with his bad beer and Maui, Coulombe started driving around the country, in another old station wagon, selling his products to bars and stores in different college cities. "It was just me, except for one person I hired when I was 25."

By the late '80s, the family business was looking viable and his three siblings signed up. In 1995, Coulombe became CEO and chairman of the board. His father died in 1997 and Coulombe bought the business in 2005. He couldn't afford to buy it outright, because he was in a lot of debt.

Next, Coulombe developed Three Olives Vodka. It became a successful national brand. He sold it in 2007 for \$400 million. Around 80 percent of the profit was used to pay off his debts. "After that we were losing money because we didn't have enough volume or business.

"I had to come up with something that would sell." He had an idea, and had designed a bottle and label for Pinnacle Vodka a few years before, but lacked the capital to launch it. "I decided it was time to give this Pinnacle stuff a try," he said. He put all his money and energy into it.

"It was a lot of luck, but at least I had a sales force. I had a distributorship network around the country and I

had a plant and trucks. I had the infrastructure to make it a success."

By the time he sold Pinnacle to Jim Beam in 2012 for \$635 million, Coulombe had been in the business for over 30 years, and was thinking about retirement. "I was already tired."

Coulombe met his wife Giselaïne on a blind date in 2006. She has two children, both in college now. Coulombe calls them his kids, too. They started building their home on Southport in 2007.

Giselaïne, who her husband and close friends call a phenomenal cook, prefers to stay out of the limelight, and the couple spends a lot of time together at home. "We like having dinner parties, and yes, we do all the cooking and cleaning up ourselves," Coulombe said. "I set the table and wash the dishes."

He also stops at Hannaford in Boothbay Harbor to pick up food, and that can be time-consuming when you're a well-known figure in a small town. "Giselaïne always asks me what took me so long, because so many people stop me to talk."

"And he always forgets something," Giselaïne added.

Coulombe said his wife weighs in on most of his business dealings. "Right. He defers to me on every decision he makes," she joked.

"I ask her, she says no, and I do it anyway," Coulombe said.

One day during the finalization of the Pinnacle/Jim Beam sale, Coulombe was driving with his close friend and attorney John Suczynski, who joined up with him in 2007. "Paul had been quiet," Suczynski said. "Out of the blue he said, 'I want to go to the Boothbay region and drive the economy. That's my next project.'"

"That was around the time he told me he was retiring," Giselaïne said.

He bought the golf course in 2013 and began rebuilding it. He said it's now one of the best courses, and possibly the best course, in Maine and New England.

In December 2016, Coulombe got word that Lafayette Group was on the verge of buying Rocktide, so he called Suczynski to get his opinion on purchasing the inn. Coulombe said Suczynski advised him against it. "It's going to be too much work."

Coulombe's brother-in-law, Russ Armstrong, who heads up Coulombe's construction projects, remembers being with him in Florida that day. "He said, 'God, what would I do with it?' I had no answer because I'd walked through it and knew it would require an insurmountable amount of work.

"We started driving, and Paul kept piping up. 'How cool would it be for people to have a nice place to visit. Maybe we could change up the rooms. Maybe we could just do a little bit.'

"He was talking himself into it. He was getting this vision, like he does, just like a train. Once he gets up over the hill, he's got it, and he's going with it."

Then Suczynski got a text from him. It read, "I bought Rocktide."

Coulombe paid \$3.75 million for the property, and has now put more than \$10 million into it.

Coulombe said his mind never stops working, and he's forever thinking of ways to improve on his businesses. Though he and Giselaïne spend much of their winters at their home in Naples, Florida, his mind is usually back in Boothbay. "Whenever we go out, to a golf course, or a

restaurant, I'm always watching how they operate, and what they may do better or differently than we do. We can always improve."

"My wife complained the other day, saying, 'Just so you know, you spend 80 or 90 percent of your time, and your energy, on Boothbay.' And I guess I do, but it's fun, and it's exciting, and I can see and feel the tide turning. It's really all about keeping the younger people here. They need something to look forward to."

Coulombe has had his share of controversy over the years since he became a multi-millionaire.

An article published in the Portland magazine *Maine Biz* in the early 2000s cited some of Maine's popular liquor company executives, and singled out Coulombe and his one-time business, White Rock Distilleries. "The writer claimed I didn't know what I was doing, and that I was going to be a failure," Coulombe said. "That I didn't have the sales force or the marketing clout or the advertising.

"The last sentence read, 'The only person who doesn't know he's going to be a failure is Paul Coulombe.'"

"Three years later a new editor from the magazine called me to ask me about doing another story. I told him he needed to bring that first one back with a retraction. He wrote another story about how I had the last laugh."

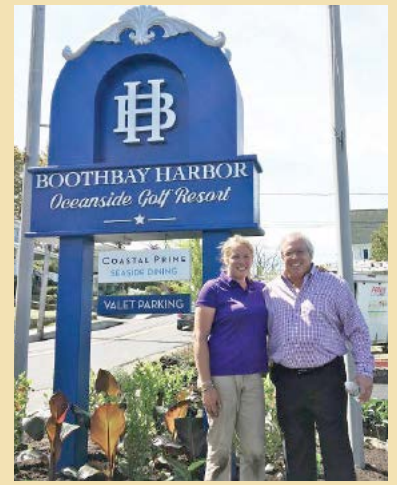
Coulombe is adamant that many of the changes he's made in the community are selfless. "It's not about me, or Giselaïne. It's about the local people in this community. We could just retire on Southport and in Naples, but I think it's worthwhile to make a difference here."

Even his wife questions why he continues to forge on, in the face of sometimes overwhelming adversity. "There has to be something in it for you, or you wouldn't be doing it, because all humans have a certain level of selfishness," she said. "You need to sit down and take a long hard look and answer that question for yourself."

"The reason I do it is because I see what comes out of it," Coulombe said. "I've seen how things can impact society. There's no greater reward than that. Selling vodka is exciting, but not that exciting. Seeing smiling faces walk out of Oceanside or the golf club, or a kid coming out of the Y, that's great.

"It's all about hard work and tenacity, and never giving up. All those seemingly boring values really make a difference. And you have to be nice to people, and welcome them into your community and give them value for their dollar so they want to come back. It's all about providing the best experience for people you can.

"I want to help make the Boothbay peninsula the best it can be."



Paul Coulombe makes a point of getting to know his employees, well over 100, on a first-name basis. Here he is with landscape designer Lauren Bradley at the newly opened Oceanside Golf Resort. SUZI THAYER/Boothbay Register