



Mike Wolken gives a pep talk to employees before the lunch rush starts during the September sales.

SERVICE WITH A SMILE



Turf Caters to the Customer

By Louis Guida | Photos by Kirk Schlea

October 7, 2011. It's opening day at Keeneland's 75th anniversary meet, and Mike Wolken doesn't have time for the races. He is head of Turf Catering and too busy making sure every kitchen, dining room, and concession stand is handling the record crowd of more than 19,000 filing through the legendary track's limestone gates.

"Every person who comes in here today will eat," Wolken says. "There's no soft opening at Keeneland. It all has to come together and happen like ... boom. When the doors open, we're on. And it's all got to be perfect."

Wolken hustles up and down the track's four levels on service elevators and back stairs. He constantly runs into people — from tied-and-jacketed types lunching in the Lexington Room to a trainer in cowboy boots at a grandstand bar and a bandanaed corned-beef stirrer in a steam-filled kitchen — and greets them with handshakes and hugs and chats them up. He seems born to this place and job — and he just about was.

He's the third generation of his family to run Turf Catering, the only food-and-beverage concessionaire Keeneland has ever had. Turf Catering, thus, is celebrating 75 years at Keeneland as well.

"It started in 1936, when my grandfather signed a one-page contract with Hal Price Headley [Keeneland's first president], and then we literally operated on a handshake," Wolken says.

"My dad knows the whole story."

His dad is Larry Wolken, 81 and living in Hot Springs, Ark., but in Lexington for the anniversary meet. He traces the company to his father Joe Wolken,

a Jewish immigrant born in Russia who came to America at age 7 with his father. The family settled in Chicago, where Joe and his brother Bill ran a basement lunchroom and pool hall with slot machines in the 1920s.

The "hearsay," according to Larry Wolken, is that they broke into the race track concession business when Bill told management at nearby Hawthorne Park that its food service wasn't any good and was hired to do it. "He came back and told my dad, 'Joe,

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Left, maitre d' Gary Ranft and chef de cuisine Ed Boutilier

I think I got us in trouble.' ” Hawthorne Catering was thereby born.

In the 1930s the company expanded to other tracks — Arlington and Washington around Chicago, Oaklawn in Hot Springs, the Fair Grounds in New Orleans, Arlington Downs in Texas, and Tanforan in California. A cadre of about six people, including his father, ran the business, Larry Wolken says. “They were like gypsies. They’d move all over the country, from track

to track. They had an Orange Crush concession — ‘staffed by 200 redheads’ — at the 1932 Chicago World’s Fair. And one year, 1941, they even had a concession at the Rose Bowl.”

Early on the company was renamed Turf Catering, and in time, Joe Wolken bought out his brother Bill. Most of its tracks eventually opted for in-house concessions. Today, Turf runs the food service only at Keeneland and at the Hot Springs Convention Center, where Mike Wolken’s older brother, Brad, is in



Left, Wolken confers with concession manager Sarah Muncy. Above, Marcia Pulcini and Jeff Ponder help Turf run smoothly.



Clockwise from far left, longtime Turf employees Joe Gudlewski, Percy Poole, Judy Sabree, and Angel Stivers

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charge. (Brad also works the Keeneland meets.)

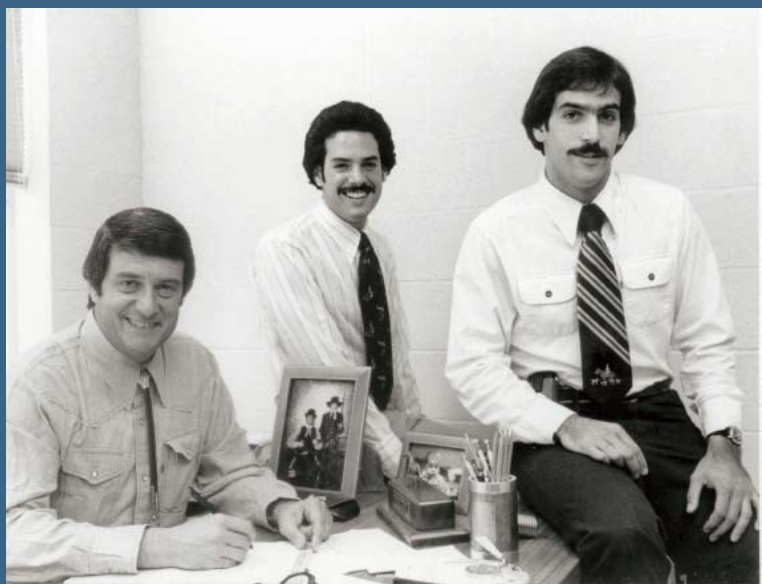
“We live in a time in which business relationships last for months, not years,” Keeneland president Nick Nicholson said. “It’s very special to us that here we have a relationship that has lasted for 75 years. We so much appreciate the Wolken and the entire Turf Catering family for their role in making the Keeneland experience so special. They are as integral part of it as the bread pudding and burgoo.”

Larry Wolken, who took over the company after his father died in 1965, says the two biggest changes he’s seen impacting Turf at Keeneland have been the expansion of the clubhouse in 1991, which added new dining rooms and corporate boxes, and the reinvention of burgoo.

“The basic premise is that we want to make this as great an experience as it can be. We don’t want to meet our guests’ expectations; we want to exceed them — every day. And that’s not easy. You can’t rest at all.”

Wolken, 57, grew up with Keeneland. “I love this place,” he says. “I remember the little barbecues and picnics under the grandstand when I’d visit from Chicago as a kid.” He’s worked at the track since 1975 and has directed Turf operations there since around 1980. (His official title now is vice president.) “I always felt like we’re very much part of the family here.”

Keeneland’s growth over the decades has compelled Turf’s growth. And that’s been “a blessing and a challenge,” according to Wolken. The physical facility — “our back of the house” — is



Father Larry, who ran Turf Catering for many years before his retirement, with sons Brad and Mike today and in 1977

“That was the greatest change,” he says. “Burgoo’s supposed to be thick and hearty, but in 1965 it was really bad here. It was like a thin vegetable soup with a little meat floating around in it.”

One day Ted Bassett, who became Keeneland’s president in 1970, returned from Saratoga, where he’d enjoyed the clam chowder served at the track’s concession stands. “He wanted burgoo to become something like that — a signature food — at Keeneland. And he didn’t say, ‘Can you do it?’ It was, ‘Do it!’”

Bassett’s command reflected Keeneland’s overall approach, Wolken says. “Management has changed over the years — Louie Haggin, W.T. Bishop, Ted Bassett in my days — but the message has stayed the same. It was drilled into me by my dad and reiterated by management. Quality. And we’ve always followed that.”

Mike Wolken says he’s gotten the same message — from his dad and from Keeneland. “The bar is set so high. Keeneland’s guests expect excellence at every turn. And Turf Catering’s ba-

limited and operationally demanding for food service. There are seven kitchens scattered throughout the main track and four at other locations on the grounds. “We’ve been able to step up our game. We’ve learned how to feed thousands of people with a modest infrastructure.”

During meets, more than 3,200 people can sit down for a meal each race day in nine dining areas and 22 corporate suites, and order food and drink at 50 concession stands. The Track Kitchen, a separate facility on the backside, is open year-round except for holidays.

In addition to the spring and fall race meets and year-long simulcasting, Turf services four sales a year and an increasing number of special events at Keeneland, some related to the racing industry, but many — from non-profit fundraisers to car shows and wedding receptions — having nothing to do with horses.

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Food at the races, sales, or events ranges from favorites such as burgoo, corned beef (cooked in-house), and bread pudding to shrimp salad, crab cakes, salmon, turkey, and beef, strip and tenderloin. “We serve restaurant food in a sports and entertainment setting,” says chef de cuisine Ed Boutilier. “Everything from hot dogs to Ahi tuna.”

Boutilier has been Turf’s top chef off and (mostly) on for almost 25 years. “Every time you turn, we’re get-

ting bigger and bigger, and we have growing pains every year,” he says. His job has become “more executive” and less hands-on in the kitchen. “I order all the food and write every menu, and I keep up with the food trends.”

Boutilier is one of Turf’s three top managers at Keeneland. The others are director of operations Jeff Ponder, who’s been with the company off and (mostly) on for more than 30 years, and director of dining room operations and special



Above, cadre of Turf cooks in the 1950s prepares for a raceday crowd; inset, a newspaper advertisement dates to opening day in 1936; opposite, grandfather Joseph founded Turf Catering with his brother.



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Then, a small sample: a shout out to Norm; a hug for Glenn, and another for Kathy; Sarah, 17 years here, says “it’s a good company to work for”; Missy is an “institution” in the Lafayette Room; Mauriza is “glad to be back”; Betty chops onions and “loves” her job; Joe’s “been here since 1974”; Judy’s a 30-year veteran; and Percy, tending a second-floor grandstand bar, holds the record for Turf’s longest consecutive employee — “36 years. I love it.”

Amid the warmth Wolken tells a new bread pudding server to “slow it down and make sure it’s right” and a bartender to “smile” because “our customers are Keeneland’s guests.” He picks a napkin from the floor. He wonders why a concession menu doesn’t list every item available at the stand.

“My job is to create the right work environment. To motivate people,” Wolken says. “This is a team, a partnership. I ask my employees to give me everything they’ve got. And if we do this together, both of us will give everything we’ve got.”

“I can walk in a room and tell how well it’s running. I can just feel it.” Today, Wolken likes what he sees. “Everybody’s pretty happy. I’ve never seen a smoother opening day. That tells me a lot about the strength of our company.” 🐾

events Marcia Pulcini, a 15-year veteran. They help oversee a staff of about 40 full-time employees and a brigade of seasonal workers — 100 for sales and 750 for meets.

About half of the race-meet seasonal workers return each year. Weeks are spent hiring and training the newcomers. “Finding the talent you need is a big challenge,” Pulcini says. “It’s hard to place people, to get the right people in the right spots.”

“We open a new business twice a year,” Ponder says. “You can tell new employees what a race meet is like, but they have to experience it to know what it is. We give them the tools they need, because if they don’t succeed, we don’t succeed.”

The first indication of that success comes on opening day of a race meet and the responsibility for it ultimately rests at the top of Turf’s food chain and Mike Wolken. That’s why on this 75th anniversary opening day, Wolken is walking every food service corner of the track and troubleshooting each detail.

He’s already “handicapped” the crowd. “Our spreadsheets are the foundation. We keep meticulous records. We look at the history from past years, and the weather. Eating habits change because of the temperature.” His cell phone beeps with text updates on attendance. At two o’clock he looks at the numbers and predicts a record crowd.

Everywhere he walks, Wolken greets his employees. It starts with “Happy opening day” to Joanne in a third-floor dining room.

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