

JOURNAL PHOTOS / JANE HALE

Custom cabinetmaker Vladimir Grischenko leafs through building plans in his Burton workshop. The Ukrainian emigre was in the United States just three years before establishing his woodworking business, Vernissage.

Crafting the American dream

Russian's resolve and love of woodworking translate to successful business

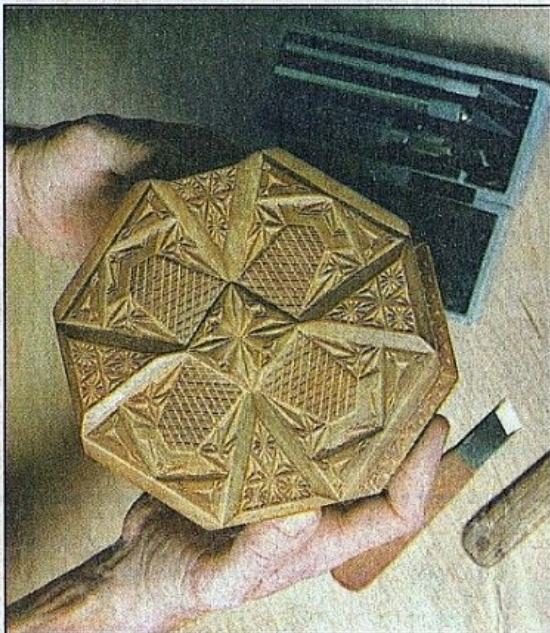
By Kim Crawford
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

When Vladimir Grischenko walked into Ron's Kitchens & Baths and tried to explain that he wanted to make cabinets, his English was so poor the staff couldn't understand him.

"We didn't really want to pursue what he was telling us," business owner Stephen Allen says about Grischenko's pitch three years ago.

Their first reaction was to dismiss the slight, somewhat shy young man with pictures of his work. One of the employees took a look at the photos Grischenko had brought; she was impressed with the look of his woodworking, but that didn't matter greatly.

After all, salespeople routinely come into their Burton showroom trying to sell their particular line of cabinets. And besides, if a guy couldn't communicate



Grischenko carved this box while in high school.



Grischenko's signature is the name of his company, Vernissage, a French word derived from the name of the craftsman who invented varnish.

Please see **DREAM, B2**

DREAM

Continued from B1

with designers and customers, what did it matter how good a cabinetmaker he was?

Grischenko, 37, remembers that day well.

"I saw Steve, he's very busy," the Ukrainian emigre says in clear, accented English. "I cannot explain what I can do. I understand (English) very good, but I could not speak it."

Three years later, the days of misunderstanding and miscommunication between the two men may well be over. Grischenko now runs his own business, Vernissage Handmade Cabinetry, custom-building cabinets for kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms and studies, entertainment centers, hutches, desks and built-in furniture of all sorts. He does this, working hand-in-hand with Ron's Kitchen & Baths.

"He doesn't just build cabinets," Allen says. "He builds art. He doesn't copy anybody, he creates."

Cabinets of mahogany, bookshelves of maple, an entertainment center of walnut. Grischenko can give them the look of the Old World or French country; he can execute styles that are formal, traditional or contemporary. On a couple of pieces on display, Grischenko has placed the delicate imprint of a maple leaf, as if it had floated down and, somehow, left its impression. Allen says customers love it.

An electrical engineer by training, the Kiev, Ukraine, native came from a family where woodworking was a tradition. As a child, Grischenko saw his grandfather's home and the work he'd done there, from household carpentry to furniture craftsmanship. It was amazing, Grischenko says, that the old man could have done so much with simple hand tools.

Grischenko's father had done woodworking as a hobby, and Grischenko himself had a knack for carving and working with wood as a young man. "I enjoyed working with my hands, making things," he said.

By the time economic reforms rolled around in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Grischenko, then in his 20s, was making sound system amplifiers and speakers. He was thinking about opening and running a business.

"I think, 'I can do so much more than I'm doing now,'" Grischenko says. "More art, more craftsmanship."

He took some business courses and began to study woodworking and furniture styles, woods, products and tools at the Institute of Patents in Kiev. Eventually he began to find jobs in the remodeling business and left his job as an electrical engineer.

By 1990, the Soviet Union was breaking up and its republics, like the Ukraine, were going their

separate ways. It was a time of political and economic instability, and in some republics, danger and violence.

Grischenko moved his family to Israel, where he worked for five years establishing his cabinetmaking business in Haifa.

Grischenko's in-laws, meanwhile, had settled in Grand Blanc Township, and they helped bring his family to the United States. Still, it was hard leaving the home and successful business they had established.

"Risky," says Grischenko, about the worries he and his wife suffered leaving Israel in the spring of 1995. "Very hard decision."

He had some savings, but most of it went to buy a car so he could find a job, and he gave himself three months to find work and an income or he'd have to go back. He had marketable skills and business knowledge, but while he and his wife, Anna, had studied English, they hadn't used it and couldn't really speak it.

He read the newspaper's classified ads and saw one for a finish carpenter at a condominium job site in eastern Genesee County. Although he didn't specifically know the job, he knew he could learn it. He drove to the site, watched how the professionals did the job for a couple of hours and took note of the tools they used.

"I watch for two, three hours and I understand what tools I need," Grischenko says. "I go to Sears, other places to buy them, and I start."

The site's manager gave him the opportunity to prove himself, and Grischenko went to work.

For about six months, he did trim carpentry and improved his English, "talking to the guys." Then he worked installing cabinets in the metro Detroit area and briefly formed a partnership with another man that ended not long after it began. With a loan from relatives, he opened his own shop and began building cabinets for a design company in Birmingham.

Grischenko finally learned the language and had the cabinetry he needed to show the staff at Ron's Kitchens & Baths. He went back and made his pitch again, this time more confidently. This time, he got the attention of Stephen Allen.

"I went down to his shop and saw his work, his doors, his cabinets," Allen says. "The attention to detail was amazing."

That second time was the charm; Grischenko's custom-made cabinets would become a product line for Allen's business. The name Grischenko chose for it — Vernissage — is a French word derived from the name of an influential 18th century furniture craftsman who invented varnish. It refers to the practice of getting art ready to show in public, though the modern definition of vernissage is the opening of an

art exhibit.

"We've never done this kind of work before," Allen says about offering Grischenko's custom cabinets. "Now we're growing together, on the learning curve together."

Grischenko is proud of the satisfaction and delight customers have taken in his work. Allen said one couple was so pleased they invited the contractors to dinner at their home.

Grischenko's shop is still a small one — he has a couple of employees now — but he is confident the business will grow. Allen is confident demand for Grischenko's custom work is on the rise.

"We'll be doing a lot more," he predicts.

Allen says that Grischenko isn't just a fine craftsman and hard-working businessman, he's

also the embodiment of the American dream — an immigrant who comes to the United States, works hard and becomes a success.

Grischenko says he is pleased with life in the States for himself and his family, and he says he appreciates the opportunity and freedom here; he wonders if Americans realize how lucky they are to have what many other people in the world don't.

He says he finds his work very satisfying, from the artistic and engineering aspects of designing pieces to the hands-on production and execution of projects.

"I try to do a nice job," he says. "I have very long days to get the business going, but I make a good living. I can say in my business history, I don't ever have one customer not satisfied 100 percent."

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