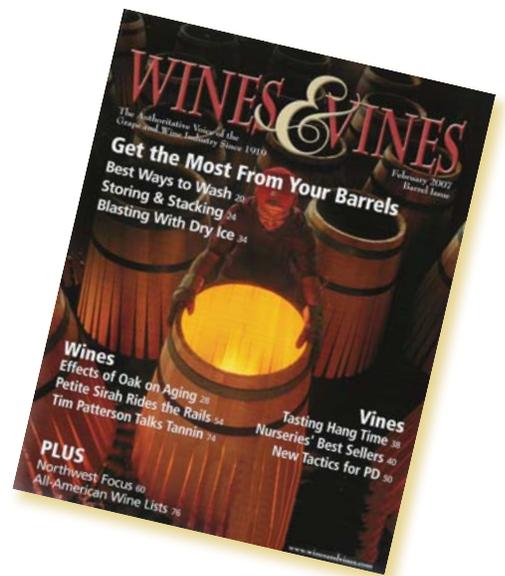


The Blue Tooth Tour

A case study in PR

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As Seen In
Wines & Vines
February 2007



The Blue Tooth tourists set off on the right track to promote their favorite Petite Sirah wine. Happy travelers journeyed in vintage style through the heartland, from Fort Worth to Chicago the summer of 2005.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Producers of little-known Petite Sirah wines banded together to promote the sometimes heavy-handed varietal in a most civilized manner.
- After the formation of PS I Love You and two nationwide "Blue Tooth Tours," SKUs for Petite Sirah soared 85% in 2005 and 65% more in the first half of 2006.
- To eliminate the rigors of long distance bus travel, the second Blue Tooth tour was staged in private, luxury railroad cars; six producers contributed \$9,000 each to go along for the ride.
- The train proved such a draw that reservations were required to attend the tastings.

It is wise to be wary of anything that needs a powerful public relations push to get your attention, particularly something you're certain you don't need. On recent vinous PR ploy had a company re-inventing an old label by sending samples in the most handsome, beautifully carpentered wine box you have ever seen - this for wines selling at just over 10 bucks a bang.

The other side of the PR game is exposed when you see something that sizzles with innovation and inspiration, like the efforts on behalf of Petite Sirah, a grape variety which traditionally produces rough, rustic wines that on one had confused with the "noble" varieties. Now this offspring of Syrah and Peloursin has been imprinted upon our minds and our palates through the "PS I Love You" campaign and the "Blue Tooth Tour," which employed restored classic rail cars to promote tastings.



A souvenir of PS I Love You's Blue Tooth Tour took advantage of the grape's singular ability to stain teeth, while educating the public to the varietal's delights.



The Blue Tooth engine, (left), and the tour's private dome car, (right), await the tour's resumption in St. Louis. The charter allowed participants to unpack once and entertain consumers and press in the comfort of their private cars.

The common factor behind both those PR programs is Jo Diaz, whose Windsor, Calif., communications firm handles a wide range of wine industry promotional efforts. “The inspiration for starting a campaign on behalf of Petite Sirah came from one of my clients, Concannon Vineyard,” specifically from Concannon marketing director Lynn Kirimili, she says. “Concannon was the first winery to varietal label Petite Sirah. That was the 1961 vintage, released in 1964 at a time when varietal labeling was hardly vogue.”

The first meeting of the Petite Sirah advocacy group coincided with the first annual Petite Sirah Symposium,

held each year now for five years at Foppiano Vineyards. At that gathering, an earlier chance comment from writer Dan Berger - he had suggested that Petite’s advocacy group be given the slogan “PS I Love You” - blossomed into the catchy name on which the group now hangs its hat.

“That was the shot in the arm that the group needed, if we were ever going to advance varietal understanding in any substantive way,” Diaz says. “The group has an annual budget of \$18,000 that just breaks even with administrative and marketing costs each year, as it’s completely dependant on members’ annual dues. We don’t have advocates, we don’t have hundreds of members, and the dues are fairly reasonable. So it’s \$18K or bust each year. So far, so good, nearly five years later.

Once they had a name, Kirimili and Diaz came up with The Big Idea. What, they pondered, would bring out trade *and* media, and create a buzz that would draw people to the event and also leave them dazzled?

Maybe, like the hobo that Petite Sirah suggests to some, you take to the rails - but in a more refined manner - to convince observers of you noble aspirations. Maybe you rent a couple of elegantly refurbished rail cars, complete with satellite television and fully equipped kitchen, the other a space-efficient, yet rock you to sleep comfortable Pull-man - and a traipse across the country for five days, offering evening tastings under the dome.

“Well, it seemed like an idea that might get people at least intrigued,” Diaz says modestly. “People are fascinated by refurbished rail cars, with polished mahogany and leather, and elegant service.” The first 2005 railroad tour took in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco and Los Angeles, interrupted by a flooded-out track. The second visited Fort Worth, St. Louis and Chicago.

The bait worked. “We actually had to limit our guest list to 100 people each evening, otherwise no one would have been able to move, much less taste,” Diaz says.

Actually, the first Blue Tooth tour, in 2004, took to the road, not to the rails. Money was an early sticking point. “The question was,” Diaz acknowledges, “how could we possibly pull off a \$200,000 party for trade and media? The answer was that the Concannon group generously stepped forward and put up the first \$150,000 to get things rolling.

“And so we began to brainstorm. No idea was too small or too great. Everything had to be put on the table and nothing would be scoffed at. We decided to call it ‘The Blue Tooth Tour.’ You know - Petite Sirah is so dark that it stains your teeth. The first year, we rented a motor home and drove all over the U.S. We drove from San Francisco to LA to Phoenix, Santa Fe, Dallas and to Houston. We came off the road for three weeks; the drove from Boston to New York City, Baltimore, Charlotte, Atlanta, Orlando and Miami. We had tastings in museums, zoos, clubs, grand ballrooms and on a yacht - Miami, of course. Going from place to place was exhausting, as well as having to set up and tear down at each venue. So, for the following year, we thought, ‘How can we make them come to us?’”

Thus, in its second year, Blue Tooth took the train, and six Petite Sirah producers brought their wines to show off at different cities along the tracks.

“Initially, Louis Foppiano threw out the idea that he’d like to do this kind of tasting on Amtrak. To do what he wanted, though, would still mean getting off and on at each stop. We’d again be at the mercy of an exhausting trip, and the principals who were in transit wouldn’t be at their personal best, because they’d be in and out of trains, planes and automobiles, and we all know the result of *that* movie!

“So, my partner-husband Jose came up with the idea of Patrick Henry’s Creative Charters luxury train. It could haul everyone around in comfort, with minimal exhaustion. We pitched it to the members of PSILY, telling them that there were only six berths available and that they’s better get ‘on board’ ASAP. People came forward immediately: Patty Bogle (Bogle Vineyards), Jim and Helen Concannon (and winemaker Adam Richardson), Louis Foppiano, Dan Teldeschi, Parducci’s winemaker Bob Swain, and the Mettlers from the Delta, Larry and Char.”

The tab, per vintner, was \$9,000. The pitch was alluring: No airports or planes, no hotel rooms, no taxis, minimal food purchases (onboard food service), no schlepping their wine, point-of-sale material or personal belongings around. Just a no-hassle jaunt around the country on board their own luxury rail cars.

“With a train that costs \$35,000 a week to get onto the tracks, we needed an investment from each of the people who participated. Miraculously, there were enough vintners who thought this would be worth it, and off we went,” Diaz says.

“Logistically, it took four people to orchestrate: Patrick Henry, Jose Diaz, Melanie Diaz (my daughter/administrative executive assistant) and myself. Patrick managed Amtrak schedules and railroad stations, his chef and two porters. Jose handled venue logistics; Melanie handled all details - invites, RSVPs, printing, die cutting, supplies, et cetera - and I worked the budget and vintners, including our sponsor, Concannon.”

And what does Jim Concannon have to say about the event? “We’d do it again in a heartbeat,” he says.



“We measure success by the tremendous increase in awareness and sales of this variety. The reaction from retailers and restaurants had been positive, not only in California but nationwide. The trip was a unique idea and allows us, in a very positive way, to concentrate on key accounts in various cities. Petite Sirah is America’s varietal.”

Concannon Vineyard’s Helen and Jim Concannon sponsored the tour promoting the grape Concannon first gave a varietal label in 1961. “We’d do it again in a heartbeat,” Jim

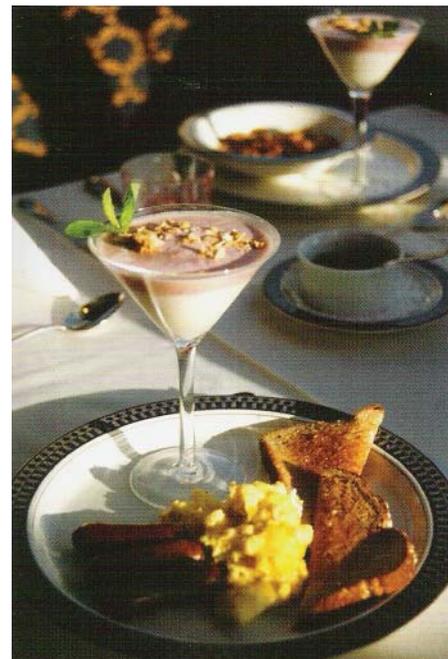
Patty Bogle agrees. “I’d jump on that train any day. It allowed us to get into new markets in a most effective way. It was such a different venue that people were very excited, and they seemed to really remember that it was all about Petite Sirah.”

“It was worth it in a number of ways,” Larry Mettler says. “It wasn’t just all the new sales and placements. We nailed down a new distributor in St. Louis, and got the chance to meet our current distributors in Texas and Illinois, and the format was very exciting.”

Lou Foppiano is a train buff. His winery uses a red Northern Pacific caboose as office space. He says, “It was well worth it, and would certainly do it again.”

“You can see the value of the tour, and of PS I Love You, in the growth of Petite Sirah SKUs, up 85% in 2005 and up another 65% in the first six months of 2006,” Diaz says. “The wine people in Portland, part of our first Blue Tooth Tour, complain that it’s hard for them to hold an alluring tasting because we set the bar so high with our elaborate rail cars. We’ve had more than 200 magazine articles on Petite Sirah since we started PS I Love You in October 2002. Heck, I’m so excited and passionate about this whole thing that I routinely put in 80 hours a month on it - and I’m only paid for 20.”

In retrospect, it is hard to imagine how it could have been done better. I was aboard the second rail trip, and the three events were the most remarkable wine tastings I’ve been to in more than 30 years. The atmosphere of leather, mahogany, and top-class service framed and showcased current releases of the so-called “small” Sirah. The reviews? Big. Boffo. Standing Room Only.



With a dining car and private staff along for the ride, the PS lovers dined on gourmet meals for the entire trip.

