

## TastingRoom.com Creates New Sales Channel and Marketing Tool for Wineries

“Try before you buy” consumer wine business could open the door to new customers.

Paul Franson

**A SEEMINGLY UNLIKELY SOURCE** is helping wineries market their wines—and creating a new sales channel for them at the same time.

**TastingRoom.com** has perfected the technology to package wine in miniature 50ml wine bottles that can be used by the winery to provide samples to the trade, consumers and the media, and it is also creating a new “try before you buy” consumer wine business that could open the door to new customers.

The company unveiled its first offerings, packaging wine in small bottles for wineries, in 2009. According to founder and CEO **Tim Bucher**, that business now represents about a third of the business but remains the heart of their activities.

They rolled out the consumer business in October last year.



Tim Bucher, TastingRoom.com founder and CEO

bers and retaining old ones. They can also provide barrel samples for futures sales.

They're also sold in gift shops—and they can even be carried aboard airplanes.

Imports are growing rapidly, too, says Bucher. “We’re filling minibottles for importers and wineries from Australia, Italy, France, Croatia and Argentina.” TastingRoom.com has licenses as both an importer and winery.

There are some limitations on the bottles, however. TastingRoom.com suggests using them in six months. “That’s not an expiration date, and the wine doesn’t go bad,” says Bucher. “We just feel that the bottle tracks larger bottles for that long. Wine in different size bottles ages differently.”

Bucher says the company has developed equipment to fill the small bottles in an oxygen-free environment via a cutting-edge, patent-pending process created by TastingRoom.com called **T.A.S.T.E Technology** (Total Anaerobic Sample Transfer Environment), which preserves the original flavor of the wine. The wine is typically decanted from 750 ml or larger bottles, though the bottles can be filled from kegs.

A potential competitor for the TastingRoom.com packaging concept was **Crushpad**, which announced 50-ml test tube-shaped bottles last year but had backed off to focus on its core business.

Early on, the company’s rapid growth strained production at **Saverglass**, but Bucher says that problem has been corrected. “Saverglass has been phenomenal; this has created a new category for them.”

Obviously, others could package wine in small bottles, which are similar to airline nips, but Bucher says that filling without contaminating with oxygen is challenging. He admits that they also had problems with an early batch prepared for **Trefethen** but says that was a singular incidence. “We were using a mobile bottling line, and we’ve abandoned that. All bottling is done at our plant in Santa Rosa.”

TastingRoom.com has to get label approval for each wine, but Bucher says the TTB has created a new process to simplify this process. “They’ve been very supportive,” he adds.

All labels are produced in-house and printed on demand. The cost per filling the bottles and labels, packaging, etc., depends on quantity and complexity, but averages around \$1 per bottle, Bucher says.

### Sales and Marketing Tools for Wineries

The tiny bottles—each holds 1.7 oz—are being used by wineries in many ways.

Some, like **Chateau Montelena**, have added sample packs of six to their online store offerings. They’re very popular for trade samples; wineries and their distributors can leave the samples rather than trying to find a time to share 750 ml bottles at busy restaurants. Many retail and distributor buyers prefer them to taking time to see salespeople. They obviously can also save a lot of wine used in sampling.

Producers of keg wines—a rapidly growing category—use them for sampling, too.

Wineries are also sending them to critics, bloggers and writers, which is more economical and welcome by many inundated with wine. **BlackBird Vineyards** and **Cameron Hughes** are two that have used this technique, the latter combining it with an online video tasting session.

Many are making them available to club members. They allow members to try wines and order what they like, and they are useful tools for signing up new mem-

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## New Consumer Sales Channel

TastingRoom.com's consumer wine business—which inspired the company's name—was launched seriously in October when it expanded beyond California to Alaska, Nevada, New Mexico, Wyoming, Virginia, Missouri, Nebraska, Louisiana, North Dakota, New Hampshire and the District of Columbia, then to New York, Illinois and Florida, more than 80 percent of the total U.S. market, according to Bucher.

TastingRoom.com offers true-tasting sample wines from wineries such as **Grgich Hills Estate, Gundlach Bundschu, DeLoach Vineyards, Swanson, Domaine Carneros, Ackerman, Whitehall Lane** and **Carol Shelton**. In effect, it brings a tasting room with wines from many suppliers to consumers' doorsteps. TastingRoom.com has also added more than 10 new wineries to its selection.

The offerings go beyond those at a typical tasting room, however. Customers can choose vertical samples from one winery and varietal, with comparisons of different varietals or vineyards, geographical selections, the same varietals from different wineries and more.

The wine sampling six-packs are generally priced between \$19.99 and \$29.99 and are shipped with offers encouraging customers to buy the whole bottles of wine they liked best from their wine tasting.

Bucher says sales have been very strong for both the tasting packs and the whole bottles of wine they promote. "We've been flooded with orders," he claims. "Consumers are in love with it!"

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He adds that they've sold tens of thousands of bottles in only a few months.

The winery has also signed up some significant partners. The **Napa Valley Vintners** worked with them on "Tastes of Napa Valley," featuring a Chardonnay from Grgich Hills, a Sauvignon Blanc from Whitehall Lane, a Marsanne from **Ma(i)sonry**, a Cabernet from **Peju**, a Merlot from Swanson and a Sangiovese from **Luna** in one pack.

TastingRoom.com has also partnered with wine wunderkind **Gary Vaynerchuk**, host of **Wine Library TV**, a daily wine video blog with 90,000 daily viewers, and **Wine & Web** on **SiriusXM Satellite Radio**.

Vaynerchuk, who is a minority investor in TastingRoom.com, selects wines for the new **Gary Vaynerchuk Wine Experience**—a series of custom wine samplers available for purchase exclusively on TastingRoom.com.

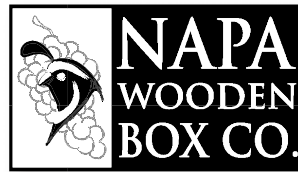
Vaynerchuk defines the tasting experiences and selects the wines in each sampler, allowing customers the opportunity to sample six wines from six different wineries.

Each wine sampler contains a tasting menu with Vaynerchuk's tasting notes and a gift card to buy a full-sized bottle of their favorite wine.

Vaynerchuk is TastingRoom.com's first celebrity-branded tasting experience, but more are in the works.

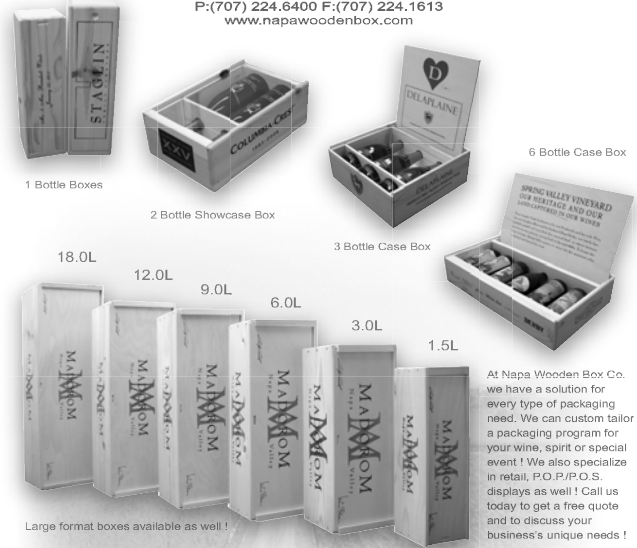
It also plans a "try before you buy" membership wine club featuring branded wines. It doesn't create its own private labels.

"I want to be an extension of winery tasting rooms," Bucher says. "These are great for the majority of people who aren't fortunate enough to live in wine country or able to travel here." **WBM**



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