

# The wine that saved a vintage downtown landmark

## Blue Slip Winery turns Southern Railway Station into a prime spot for weddings, events

By Bonny C. Millard

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Linn Slocum started making wine from kits because she enjoyed it, later surprising herself by parlaying her hobby into a winery business that has enlivened downtown Knoxville, led to the renovation of a historic site and showcased East Tennessee’s farm-to-table food movement.

Slocum’s vision, Blue Slip Winery, opened in 2009 in a small basement on West Jackson Avenue in the Old City, but last year moved to more spacious quarters in the Historic Southern Railway Station on Depot Avenue, now a destination space for weddings and other events.

Blue Slip is the “first winery in Knoxville and the first urban winery in the state of Tennessee,” says Slocum, president and one of three owners.

As she relaxes in a side room next to the tasting bar, Slocum describes the humble beginnings of her business. The tasting bar is where customers can try the winery’s offerings and then purchase a glass to drink there or a bottle to take home.

The wine is made and bottled on location. Slocum is proud of the fact that all of the fruit used is home grown in Tennessee, including fruit from Richland Vineyards and Spout Springs Estate Vineyard, both in Blaine.

“All our wines are 100 percent Tennessee fruit,” Slocum says. “It’s cheaper to buy juice from out of state, but we just want to stay committed to our local farmers.”



Linn Slocum, president and one of three co-owners of Blue Slip Winery.  
-- Chase Malone | The Ledger

The winery offers about 25 different wines, including fruit wines [wines whose main ingredient is a fruit other than grapes], and makes about 20,000 gallons of wine a year.

“The first grape that we harvest yearly is Cayuga White. It’s a hybrid and is reminiscent of a Pinot Grigio. It is a white. Our style is a dry white, and it’s also very good with blending. I’ve blended it with other whites. We have Pot Blanc that has Cayuga in it.”

And of course, no self-respecting Tennessee winery would be without a wine named in honor of the University of Tennessee’s Vol Nations’ anthem. The Cayuga White grape helps create the special wine.

“We’ve blended it with a red grape,” she explains. “It’s our Rocky Top Blush.”

Making wine is about what the grape harvest produces, she says, but fruit also makes a great base.

“We make fruit wines – blueberry, strawberry, blackberry. We’ve made peach before,” she says. “So when these fruits become available in the spring – late May and June – we are making those wines.”



The Historic Southern Railway Station on Depot Avenue has been restored and serves as home base for Blue Slip Winery.  
-- Chase Malone | The Ledger

In the early days, when Slocum's efforts started with purchased kits, she says there wasn't much about making wine on the Internet. So she tried to educate herself in the art of winemaking while also experimenting with the process. That was in 2001.

"Of course, I was reading everything I could find on wine recipes," she adds.

Slocum's creativity and innovation led to a blended wine she calls "Pot Blanc," which takes its name from the idea of southern pot luck dinners. It's unique to Blue Slip and remains a favorite of hers.

"When I was an amateur winemaker, I had three batches of grapes, different varieties, not enough to make a five-gallon carboy (a large glass jar that is used for fermentation of the fruit). I made a blend of Cayuga, Golden Muscat and Vidal Blanc. It was my first award-winning wine as an amateur, and I call it Pot Blanc – sort of like pot luck."

As she made progress, she joined two organizations: Tennessee Farm Growers Alliance and Tennessee Viticultural and Oenological Society to network with "like-minded individuals."

Later, she partnered with Jeff Galyon.



Ashley Crawford applies foil seals to the bottles of wine made at Blue Slip Winery.  
-- Chase Malone | The Ledger

"Jeff was putting in a vineyard, a small one. He had learned about wines and appreciated wines with his brother, who is deceased now, but it was something they talked about. Jeff was very interested in growing grapes and winemaking."

Slocum says the West Jackson location served its purpose as they were getting established, but it was difficult to get deliveries, and labor intensive with getting the bottles downstairs.

“The space was in the Old City. It was below street level, when we were small. That was a good location in that there were people walking by our door, but we soon, in a number of years, outgrew the space. We were not able to have events and wine-related events that we wanted to.”

Connie Perrin, a grape grower in Blaine, recalls the space and the efforts it took to get her grapes to the winemaker.

“We had to pass the grapes through the window down at the other place,” Perrin says. “They’d take the window out, and they’d put the crusher under there. We pick in these one-ton bins out here. You can’t put that through a window. So we’d have to dip them out in five-gallon buckets, and they would pass them through those windows into the crusher.”



Blue Slip makes 25 varieties of wine, including the award-winning Pot Blanc and one for UT sports fans, Rocky Top Blush. -- Chase Malone | The Ledger

Slocum shares the story of how Blue Slip’s new home was renovated to restore much of the building’s beauty, including marble floors and wide wooden doorways. While touring, Slocum points out that African-Americans and whites were forced to use separate dining and waiting areas.

“The property had this station and the depot,” she says. “The station handled the passengers and their luggage, and the depot was the freight. It was built with equal amenities but segregated, so you can kind of see that design taking place with the staircase.

“Upstairs was a white waiting room and a black waiting room. The downstairs ballroom was the original dining room.”

The station was built in 1903, and the last trains left in 1970. At the height of the station’s popularity, there were 30 trains a day, she says. The Old Smoky Railway Museum is located on the property in train cars behind the station.

Before discovering the vacant train station, Slocum, along with her business partners, Galyon and Marv House, started looking at properties that could provide a unique experience.



Addie Atcheley and Bryce Rayburn oversee Blue Slip's rasting bar.  
-- Bonny Millard | The Ledger

“We wanted to stay downtown,” she says. “I was surprised that this building had not been utilized for something. It was so beautiful and had all this parking and accessibility. It just seemed to have so many things going for it.”

At first, they had a lease-to-own contract with the building’s owner and closed on the building at the end of April 2014. Renovations started the next day. The building had been auctioned in the 80s and converted into office space.

“It’s really what saved the building,” Slocum says.

In the upstairs ballroom, carpet had been glued to the marble flooring and had to be removed.

“We started demoing that room on May 1, and our first wedding was June 7,” she says, adding that they were able to save the marble floor. “We had to go to Tennessee Marble a few times in Friendsville and get a few pieces.”

A big expense was bringing the building up to fire codes.

“In order to put it back into public space by assembly, we had to sprinkle the building. There was no fire suppression, which was also probably one of the reasons why it had not been used. It was quite costly.”

An open house and ribbon cutting was held last October. Though the facility is fully functioning, Slocum still has more plans to continue the transformation of bringing the building to life.

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The atmosphere of the tasting bar's exposed brick walls offers a remarkable glimpse into the train station's past and the many people who passed through its doors. Employees greet customers with warm smiles and share information about the winery as well as the train station.

"It's just a very pleasurable experience to be behind the tasting bar, and you just meet so many interesting people, especially tourists, and it is a tourist attraction," Slocum says.

"The conversations can be largely about the wine, but they also turn to many other subjects too. No one is rushed. Very few come or leave unhappy. It's just a nice setting for conversation. And now we have something more than wine. People come here for history [and for the] love trains."

The move to the station also allowed the business to serve as a venue for many different types of events, repurposing a building with a rich history for Knoxville and invigorating the neighborhood.

A number of weddings, luncheons, and corporate meetings have already been booked in addition to planned wine-related events and food pairings.

"We're getting into cooking demonstrations, cooking classes, and we'll get into some winemaking classes."

Just in time for Valentine's Day this year, Maja Djorcev Roy, a wine aficionado and business owner, organized a chocolate candy making class led by Janice Fillmore, owner of The Chocolate B'ar of Townsend, and wine pairing. In late January, the Tennessee Stage Company presented a production of "Harvey." The winery also offers a shop and tasting bar that sells wine and other associated items.

Since the Blue Slip opened five years ago, state laws have changed to allow wineries more latitude in how they sell their products. Wineries are allowed to ship bottles in-state and out-of-state where those states permit it.

"Another thing that happened last year, now wineries are able to sell wine by the glass. We've never been able to do that before."

Wineries are also able to self-distribute wine to hotels and restaurants within a 100-mile radius. This provides a new opportunity to expose Blue Slip's wines to people who may not be familiar with them, Slocum says.

"Those are opportunities for restaurants and hotels and us to provide a farm-to-glass product," Slocum adds. "We are working on those arrangements now."

Another legislative change allows growers to become farm wineries through a licensed winery.

"We have a number of growers, for instance Richland Vineyards – the Perrins – they had 18 acres of planted grapes that they sold to Tennessee wineries, and they were interested in becoming a farm

winery. They got their license as a farm winery. We took their fruit and made their wine for them and sold it back to them in the form of wine.

“We submitted all the paperwork for their labels and sold them the wine that they were able to sell on their property. A farm winery cannot make the wine. The wine that they sell has to be made by a licensed winery using 95 percent of their fruit. The back of the label would say bottled by Blue Slip Winery.”

Richland Vineyards no longer operates as a farm winery but continues to sell its grapes to area wineries.

Slocum says she always wanted to own a storefront, even before winemaking, but never anticipated it would lead to “where I’m sitting today.”

“I just feel so blessed this is what it is, and this is what it’s become. I enjoy meeting people, the conversations and the experiences this has awarded me.”