



AIANTA

American Indian Alaska Native
Tourism Association



Grisso Mansion and Vineyard

Tribal Agritourism Development

Seminole Nation Vineyard: A Case Study



THE COMMUNITY

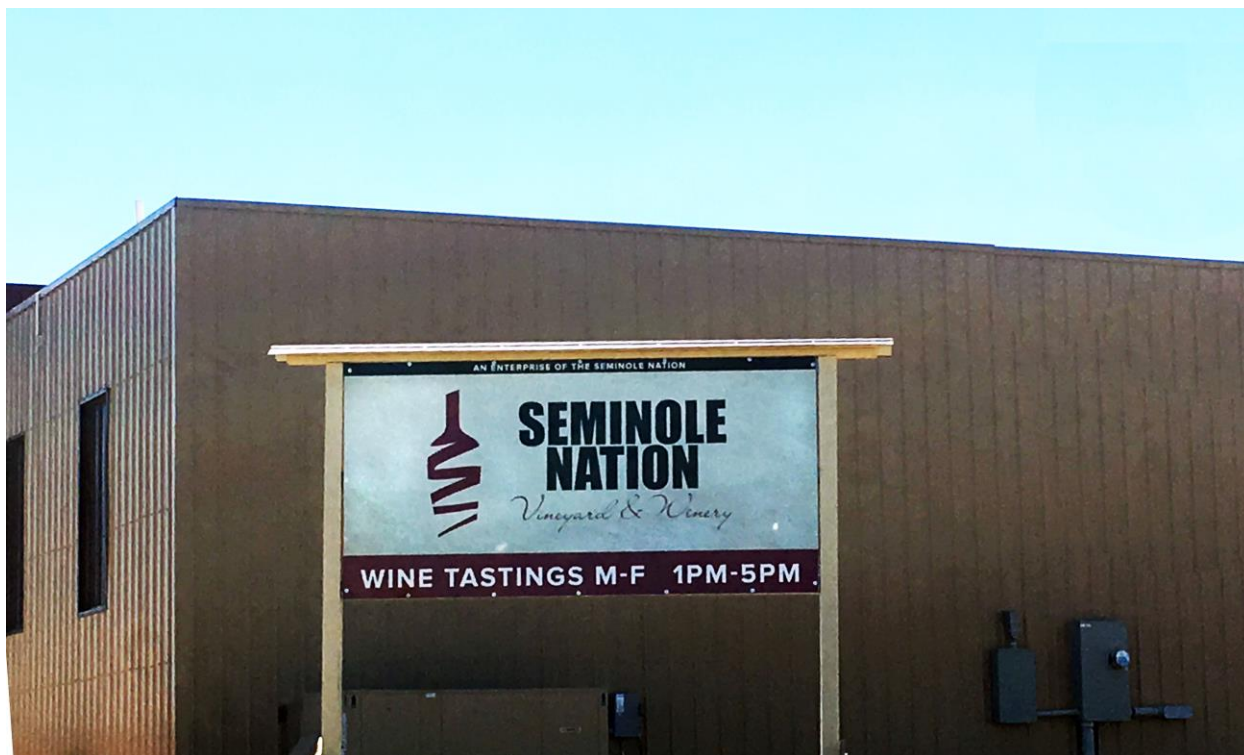
The Seminole Tribal Jurisdiction Area is located in south-central Oklahoma, approximately 45 miles east of Oklahoma City, and it includes most of Seminole County. The Seminole Nation Tribal Complex is located in the town of Wewoka, Oklahoma, approximately 30 miles southeast of the town of Shawnee.

The Seminole were removed to Indian Territory [from Florida] following the Treaty of Payne's Landing in 1832. They were eventually granted a reservation, but after subsequent land cessations, these lands were allotted following the Seminole Agreement of 1909. Today, the tribe owns 372 acres of federal trust land and approximately 53 acres of fee simple land. An additional 35,443 allotted acres supplement the tribal land base. The Nation is comprised of 14



Tribal Agritourism Development Seminole Nation Vineyard: A Case Study

matrilineal bands, including two Freedman bands. Each band has an elected band chief and assistant band chief and meets monthly. The Seminole General Council, chaired by the Principal Chief and Assistant Chief, serves as the elected governing body.¹ There are 18,800 enrolled tribal members, with 13,533 living within the state of Oklahoma. The Seminole partner a lot with other nearby tribes, especially the Creek and Chickasaw.



The Seminole Nation Tasting Room

THE PROGRAM

Seminole Nation Vineyard and winery (SNVW) is an Oklahoma-based, Native American owned winery, located in Seminole, Oklahoma.² The winery is located about 2 miles Northeast of the town of Seminole. Onsite at the winery are seven acres of dedicated vines for the wine. A growing percentage of the grapes are coming from Seminole members who have participated in a program to learn viticulture. The Vineyards Grower Training Program is supported by an Administration for Native Americans Sustainable Employment and Economic Development Strategies (ANA SEEDS) grant totaling \$2.5 million over 5 years running through September 2019. The viticulture program is in its fourth year and has 16 growers mostly growing on their own land, and about 10% growing on tribal allotments.

Although communal farming was an important part of traditional Seminole practices, most Seminole people are three generations removed from farming, and 99% of Seminole owned arable land is not in production. Growing grapes for the winery is providing a path for Seminole people to get back to farming, and support a growing tourism effort by the Nation. And by sourcing within the Nation, the winery creates a ready market for the product produced by Seminole farmers.



Wine bottles at the winery

The vineyard has been operating since 2014. The winery opened its doors in April of 2016, and the tasting area has only been open since February of 2017. An integral part of the Seminole tourism program is the Grisso Mansion, purchased by the Nation in 2012. The Nation has made significant renovations to the historic property and currently brings in revenue renting it out for events. With the help of grants, the Nation plans to remodel an existing building to house a café featuring food produced in Indian Country, at least half local, and of course, serving wine from the winery. They are also interested in adding a marketplace to the mansion to showcase community businesses, such as artisans and food producers. The expected date of completion for this project is spring 2018.

The Nation is also experimenting with other food production models. At the Seminole Nation Food Distribution Center, the Nation has installed a robust aquaponics and hydroponic grow operation, supplementing the food distributed to members of the tribe. This installation is primarily in place to improve food sovereignty for the tribe, but could be expanded to supply



Tribal Agritourism Development Seminole Nation Vineyard: A Case Study

food for events at the Grisso Mansion. Additionally, the grow operation has become a mini tourist attraction. They receive visitors interested in seeing the operation and learning about hydroponics.

With the combination of the winery, vineyard, Grisso Mansion offerings, and other attractions, the Nation is striving to create a broader integrated tourism destination, versus just a single attraction. This model increases income for tribal properties and allows for greater participation of Seminole members. Janet Johnson, project administrator for the Seminole Nation, describes this strategy: "Focusing on tourism based products and services to bring outside dollars to our community will provide increased economic opportunities and for the community to take pride in the world-class experiences being offered."



Stephaney Lambert and Janet Johnson in front of the Grisso Mansion

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Seminole Nation is fortunate to have two proficient grant writers managing these projects: Janet Johnson, Project Administrator for the vineyard and winery, and Development Officer Stephaney Lambert, who leads the Grisso Mansion. Once the ideas began to be developed, and funding identified, Janet and Stephaney conducted community meetings to get feedback from the community. In the beginning turnout was low, but the feedback was very rich. Also key to their success thus far is the initial support from past tribal councils. Now, four outreach meetings are conducted each year to make sure the projects are getting community support and receiving needed input. Grants from USDA have been helpful in promoting these meetings, specifically the USDA Rural Business Development Grant (Formerly Rural Business Opportunity Grant RBOG).



Tribal Agritourism Development Seminole Nation Vineyard: A Case Study

While wine is not traditionally part of the culture of Seminole people, agriculture is. The model used for the program reflects aspects of communal cultivation practiced by Seminole people for millennia. The tribe provides the initial equipment and technical assistance, and then the winery purchases the grapes from the farmers. Each aspect relies on the other to be successful.



Seminole Tribal Member Vineyard

In addition to the quality and creativity of the wine making, the unique selling point for Seminole wine is that it is a wholly owned LLC of the Seminole Nation. This is reflected in the wine packaging. Each wine states that it is produced by the Seminole Nation and that the grapes were grown by community and tribal members who were trained to “grow grapes in and around the tribal land base.” Seminole language is also used in the messaging to consumers, such as the word “Mvto” which means thank you, and “Wecattet Cvmpusat” which means refreshing and lightly sweet.

DESCRIPTION OF BUILDING

Because of the skills of the grant writers employed by the Seminole Nation, no investment from the tribe was needed to launch the vineyard and winery. A \$250,000 USDA rural business development grant made up the first half of the funds needed to get the winery up and running.



Tribal Agritourism Development Seminole Nation Vineyard: A Case Study

Three tribal employment programs helped to get some of the labor covered, while also providing jobs: Seminole Nation Job Placement and Training Program, Seminole Nation Workforce Investment Opportunity Act Program, and Muscogee Nation TANF Program.

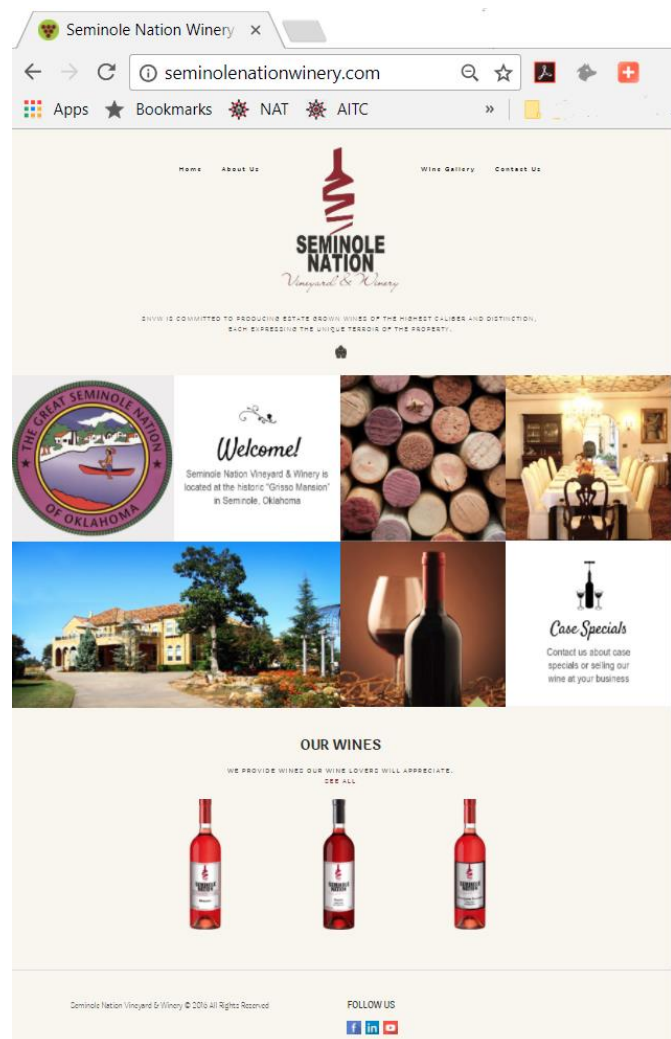
A key challenge that impacts many programs like this is maintaining community and government support through the many years required to show results. The day before the site visit was conducted a new elected Chief took office. At such junctures, despite the added effort required, it is important for program staff to educate elected officials on the progress made up to that point and the value of continued investment. Important to maintaining continuity in programing is to have strong community support to back up and justify the efforts by staff. Janet Johnson described the actions taken to maintain support for the projects: "We conduct community meetings, outreach meetings, and provide updates of the program on social media and the tribal/local newspaper."

Also a challenge generally to the Seminole Nation, is dealing with the perceptions (and misperceptions) of the non-Seminole community members. For example, when word got out that the Nation was planning to buy the Grisso Mansion, the community assumed that the Nation was planning to turn it into a casino. Municipal officials found this idea distasteful and preemptively bought adjacent properties. Due to the confidentiality of the deal the Nation was not able to engage the municipality to dispel their concerns, and now ideas to expand the operations of the mansion (sustainable agricultural plots for example) are significantly more complicated.

Many of the non-Seminole community members are unaware of the laws and policies enacted throughout history that had led to the Seminole losing a lot of their land. Without this background, efforts by the Nation to buy back historical land are occasionally met with opposition or skepticism by the surrounding community.

DESCRIPTION OF MARKETING

Currently, the Seminole Nation is marketing through three outlets: online advertising, strategic partnerships and participating in festivals and events. Digital marketing, especially social media, is by far the



Seminole Nation Vineyard & Winery



Tribal Agritourism Development Seminole Nation Vineyard: A Case Study

most expansive: being active on Facebook, posting ads, and maintaining information on their website is also important. The nation uses SEO tools to attract people to the website, and interactive monthly contests help to engage their audience.

The second method is by partnering with local and regional DMOs and other tourism businesses. The winery is listed on the Oklahoma Wine Map and a large part of their distribution is through local restaurants and stores. Finally, through hosting or participating in festivals and events, prospective customers are introduced to the tourism offerings of the Seminole Nation. Example, the Wewoka Sorghum Festival, which “showcases the importance of Oklahoma's rural heritage as well as its Native American culture.”³



Okie Noodling Festival

THE RESULTS

A key metric for success is determining how many jobs are created through the programs offered. Although no formal study has been conducted yet on the full impacts of these programs, an initial assessment has outlined the following numbers:

- The winery directly employs three people to make the wine and operate the tasting room.
- The onsite vineyard employs three fulltime people plus ten seasonal employees. 16 vineyards have gone through the viticulture training program and are engaged in grape production.
- The Grisso Mansion employs eight full time staff, and three seasonal. Numerous trades people (carpenters, masons, etc.) have also been employed to conduct renovations on the mansion.



Seminole Tribal Member Vineyard

SNVW holds a self-distribution license, which allows for direct sells to liquor stores, restaurants and casinos. Private labels are available in bulk for private events, corporate gifts, and casino house elections.

Another important metric to look at is visitor statistics including: number of visitors and where they are coming from. At this point, a large percentage of the visitors are coming from instate, as well as some bus tours. Through partnering with local tribes, Chickasaw and Creek, there are many opportunities to create a greater regional attraction bringing in visitors from further afield, including greater US as well as international.

In looking at the progress so far, it is important to ask whether the overall tourism program seems sustainable? Because very little of the funds required to maintain and grow the programs come from the tribes general fund, and an increasing amount of operating funds comes directly from revenue, sustainability seems likely. Key items to watch are whether these projects continue to be supported by elective officials and how well they can partner with neighboring tribes and regional tourism marketing efforts.





Seminole Nation Museum

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHERS

Janet felt strongly that before jumping headfirst into an idea, it is important to do a feasibility study and conduct strategic planning. Their ability to get USDA and RBDG grants depended on the results of these studies. Additionally, have a thick skin and be prepared for politics. Understanding what a win-win looks like for elected officials and managers of other departments will help gain allies. Also, keep focused on the end goal. What does success look like, and are you heading in the right direction? No plan is perfect. Not everyone will be happy. But continued communication and community involvement will gain allies and support, especially when support is needed. Finally, Janet reminds us, where there is one naysayer, there are ten more that support you. Focus on your supporters.

SPECIAL THANKS

AIANTA would like to thank the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma and specifically Janet Johnson and Stephaney Lambert for making this visit possible.

¹ sno-nsn.gov/culture/aboutsno

² seminolenationwinery.com/about-us/

³ sorghumfestivalok.org