

Signature Service Keeps Clients Coming Back for More

Cristal Blue Carriage serves a specialty market with old-fashioned hospitality

By Camella Lobo

One would think that ignoring other people's business advice wouldn't be the best way to start a successful limousine company. But Bill Kane and Chris Rodriguez, owners of Cristal Blue Carriage in Napa Valley, Calif., did just that.

"Everyone told us, 'Don't specialize,'" says Rodriguez, "We do everything they told us not to do and we are still successful." Cristal Blue is a boutique transportation company that serves the Napa and Sonoma Counties. It offers signature winery tours for the novice and most experienced of palates to what they call "the lesser known gems of Napa and Sonoma." Their personalized wine tours have been a hit so far, and they were recently nominated by NBC11 San Jose's "In Wine Country" as one of the "Best Adventures in Wine Country." After a little more than a year in busi-

ness, they are proving those advice givers wrong.

Be Our Guest

"We don't just drop clients off at the door — our tours are an entire experience," says Rodriguez. He is well aware of what it really takes to be a great host. Years of experience in the restaurant industry and in public relations have certainly taught Rodriguez and Kane a thing or two about what customers are expecting on one of Cristal Blue's wine tours. Both came from another limousine service as well, determined to fill a void in the industry.

"We found a lot of things missing," says Kane. "As they say, 'If you think you can do it better, go to.'" Kane says



"We are doing what we love and loving what we do," says Kane (far right).

that giving the ultimate in “old-time service” can mean much more revenue and job satisfaction. He thinks that a concentration on that kind of hospitality and service is what the industry is lacking.

“I like to give people the whole experience,” Rodriguez says. “Our service is more like a table on wheels.” Rodriguez and Kane are also more like *maitre d’s* than chauffeurs, as they personally ensure their clients are having an experience that they themselves would enjoy in any one of their affiliate boutique wineries.

“The experience with Cristal Blue Carriages is better revealed as being escorted by dear friends to their favorite boutique Napa Valley wineries,” says a review in *Wine Country News*.

Down to the Last Drop

Not only do Rodriguez and Kane make sure their clients are well cared for, they also run a meticulously clean and well-maintained fleet. They use two custom-painted royal blue 1996 stretched Lincoln Town Cars and one SUV, specifically for wine running.

“Our body shop has done a great job on our carriages, so well that most of our clients think they are brand-new



Rodriguez (left) and Kane don't see an end to the fulfillment of running their business.

cars,” says the company. Rodriguez says that each time his clients get out of a vehicle, he makes sure that upon their return, the interior has been manicured as if his clients were coming into a brand new car. “None of my drivers are sitting around,” says Rodriguez. “They don’t have time for that.”

Cristal’s vehicles are even equipped with insulated and air conditioned trunks for those clients taking souvenirs from the wine country home with them. It’s

paying attention to these small details that has rewarded the company with many repeat clients and referrals.

Like a Fine Wine

Cristal Blue would like to see its business grow slowly but without compromising the quality of the hospitality its clients want. Kane says the company plans on growing just a little more — to a maximum of nine vehicles. Since most of its advertising is by word of mouth, Cristal Blue has a good chance of catering to a very small but quality niche in the industry. And that makes its business rewarding.

“Like us, our drivers have personality, wine knowledge, and a true passion for what we do,” says Kane. “We could do this for a very long time.” **LCT**