

EXPLORING ARIZONA WINES

Arizona's unique terroir produces some great wines

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM

Grapes have grown in this area since the Hohokam cultivated native varieties. By the 1500s, the Spanish introduced European grapes, many of which thrived in the Southwest. However, the state's wine industry disappeared almost overnight during Prohibition.

Arizona's modern wine industry has evolved slowly since about 1973. It got a shot in the arm in 2006, when the Arizona Wine Growers Association helped craft new legislation that allowed Arizona wineries to sell and ship direct to consumers. Today, there are more than 100 wineries statewide, each of which celebrates Arizona's terroir, or the unique soil, topography and climate that imparts taste and flavor to wines.

There are three primary growing regions in Arizona: the Verde Valley north of Phoenix, Sonoita in Southern Arizona, and Willcox in Southeastern Arizona.

HEAD NORTH TO THE VERDE VALLEY

The Verde Valley is in Northern Arizona's red rock countryside and canyons surrounding Cottonwood, Jerome and Sedona, about 90 minutes north of Phoenix. Arizona winemaker (and lead vocalist for metal band Tool) Maynard James Keenan favors Northern Arizona's "harsh yet mystical" terroir. The area is now home to more than 30 wineries and tasting rooms. These are a few of the favorites, and you can find more online at www.vvwinetrail.com.

Page Springs Cellars (www.pagespringcellars.com) is a wine oasis. The tasting room is open daily and offers not only wine



flights, but a tasting menu of delicious apps and stone-fired pizzas. If you visit on a weekend, you can catch live music, take a winery tour, or book a massage or yoga session in the vineyard. Most of the wines at Page Springs are blends of several southern Rhône varieties, such as Petite Sirah, Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre. Try the 2014 La Serrana, a blend of Roussane, Viognier and Marsanne.

Alcantara Vineyard & Winery (www.alcantaravineyard.com) has been a major player in creating a viable wine industry in the state. The tasting room is open daily. For a truly unique experience, you can tour the winery and vineyard with owner Barbara Predmore every Friday or Saturday at 11:30 a.m. Alcantara offers several wines made from 100 percent locally grown grapes, including a Merlot Rosé, Mourvèdre and Pinot Noir.

Caduceus Cellar (www.caduceous.org) is the brainchild of musician Maynard James Keenan. From the Steampunk-esque tasting room in Jerome you can sample wines from both Caduceus Cellars and Merkin Vineyards. The tasting room, which also serves up coffee during the morning hours, is open daily. The Caduceus wines reflect Keenan's adoration for Northern Arizona and his ability to finesse the state's terroir to create wines most often found in arid parts of Spain and Italy. White lovers should sample the Viognier and Chenin Blanc, while red lovers must try Oneste, a Barbera-Merlot blend. For something really unique, check out the 2013 Lei Li Nebbiolo Rosé, which the tasting room staff describes as

out

“eating watermelon on a friend’s shady porch on a summer day.”

Pillsbury Wines

(www.pillsburywine.com) is the vineyard of New Zealand-born filmmaker-turned-wine-maker Sam Pillsbury. Pillsbury grows all of his grapes in Southern Arizona (Willcox), but has a tasting room in Cottonwood. You will be able to choose from 14 different wines, mostly Rhône blends, served daily in the tasting room. Be sure to check out the WildChild Red (Sangiovese, Grenache, Shiraz and Merlot), WildChild White (Riesling, Chenin Blanc, Viognier and Symphony) and Roan Red, a Mourvèdre blend.

HEAD SOUTH TO SONOITA AVA AND WILLCOX

The Sonoita/Elgin Wine Trail is about 45 minutes south of Tucson and is home to Arizona’s only designated American Viticultural Area (AVA). *USA Today* named the Sonoita/Elgin Wine Trail one of the top 10 wine trails in the U.S. Another hour past Elgin is Willcox. Nearly 75 percent of all of Arizona’s wine grapes are actually grown here, even for many of the wineries elsewhere in the state. You can find everything from bold reds to crisp whites to sweet dessert wines in Willcox. Below are a few of the Southern Arizona favorites, but you can find more, plus a great tasting map, online at www.willcoxwines.com and at www.sonoitawineguild.com.

Dos Cabezas Wineworks (www.doscabezaswinery.com) in Sonoita has been producing wines since 1995. The tasting room is open Thursday through



Sunday. Two favorites are the El Norte, a somewhat spicy red blend of Grenache, Mourvèdre, Syrah and Counoise. The Pink, perfect for those lazy September afternoons in Arizona, is a lovely rosé blend of Grenache, Mourvèdre and Syrah that smells like summer–watermelons and strawberries with a touch of an Arizona desert after the monsoon rains.

AZ Hops & Vines (www.azhopsandvines.com) is a small winery operated by two sisters in an old converted farmhouse. The tasting room, open Thursday through Sunday, is fun, quirky and family-centric, complete with a petting zoo and outdoor games. The wine labels here are as much fun as the wines. For something light and fresh, try Verena, a

blend of Malvasia and Symphony. The rare one here is Imbibe.2—a fun blend of varietals from several years, including a 2006 Petite Verdot, 2007 Syrah, Tempranillo and Graciano.

Flying Leap

Vineyards (www.flyingleapvineyards.com) specializes in ultra-premium, proprietary wines. The winery is actually in Elgin, with tasting rooms in

Willcox, Bisbee, Elgin and Tucson. You must sample the estate-grown Tempranillo. This oak-aged Spanish wine is medium-bodied with a smooth finish. Another great Rhône varietal blend is Escape, a Viognier-Marsanne blend that is reminiscent of honey and summer peaches.

Lawrence Dunham Vineyards (www.lawrencedunhamvineyards.com) is an estate wine grower in Pearce. They grow those same Rhône varietals that thrive here in Arizona—Petite Sirah, Syrah, Grenache and Viognier. You can make an appointment to visit the winery in Southern Arizona, but the tasting room in Old Town Scottsdale is open Wednesday through Sunday. LDV recently started pouring the 2012 Syrah—the winery’s first 100 percent estate-grown Syrah. The vines are babies, only a couple of years old, so this is a chance to experience the birth of a new Arizona industry. There is also an estate-grown Viognier that is similar to a Sauvignon Blanc or dry Riesling.

Susan Lanier-Graham is a Certified California Wine Appellation Specialist and a member of International Food, Wine & Travel Writers Association.