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A toast to the Verde Valley

3 wineries are bringing more recognition to Arizona

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VERDE VALLEY - Perhaps you've seen the sign for the San Dominique Winery. Just about anyone who has made the drive from Phoenix to Flagstaff along Interstate 17 knows that just before you reach Camp Verde there is an odd little house with a giant sign teetering in the front yard: "Garlic!" "Wine!"

After winding from the Cherry Road exit down the long, gravel driveway, visitors find cellarmaster Bill Staltari, with two Yorkies wiggling under one arm and his dream to bring wine culture to Arizona tucked under the other.

The dogs - Vincenzo and Little Lady Pocerina - are inextricably linked to the San Dominique Winery experience. They run down the drive, yapping their greeting at visitors who venture from the nearby highway. They sit at your feet, inside the tiny tasting room, begging for attention. They are the darlings of the operation.

Staltari began the winery and tasting room in 1981. Since then, he's hosted garlic, apple, jazz and wine festivals. The shelves of the tasting room are filled with spices, canned items and garlic. "I have a couple of vines left," he says, "but now, I buy most of my grapes when I need them."

He says water costs and warming weather have made growing his own grapes too difficult. Visitors are given 16 choices to taste, at 50 cents a glass. Staltari says dry reds are his favorite,

"I attended a seminar and wine. It's dry, spicy and u

The winery is best judged must bring cash. The win

Staltari doesn't e-mail, ei meals he prepares every he's got a significant cro sends a letter back. The steak, and the price depends on how many people sign up.

s, similar to shot glasses. Staltari says

he says, pouring hot-pepper white e.

school, just like its owner. Visitors ept debit or credit cards.

ating the seven-course specialty end money to a post-office box. Once des on the menu and the date and everything from Maine lobster to

Alcantara Vineyards

Alcantara, also near Camp Verde, rises from the dusty shrubbery like a green mirage. Travelers wind down a dirt road for several miles after turning off Arizona 260 before seeing the first glimpse of grapes. Row after row of vines run down the hillside toward a building seemingly plucked from Tuscany.

The winery has risen from its dry surroundings through the toil and vision of its owner, Barbara Predmore.

"I am a farmer that is proud to be part of Arizona vineyard growers," she says. Predmore is a petite, energetic character who greets visitors with a bubbly smile. It's obvious her passion is wine.

"I have a lot of pride in my vines, and plan that Alcantara Vineyards will be one of the finest in Arizona," she says.

Wine tastings cost \$5 for four wines, or \$8 for eight, and include a souvenir glass. The sommeliers are knowledgeable and guide visitors from whites to reds, carefully pointing out the differences in flavors. Bowls of crackers and dark chocolate sit around the room for guests to enjoy. Paintings by Smoking Joe, a Las Vegas artist Predmore admires, decorate the walls and the vineyard's labels. Although the winery is small and fairly new, it has received national attention, with its 2005 Chardonnay receiving praise from the *Wall Street Journal*.

"We have sold out of our Mourvedre and our Cabernet Pfeffer, but all our wines are popular," she says. "Our 2002 Pinot Noir is very popular and probably our finest wine. The Chardonnay is exceptional, and the white Merlot is very refreshing during these hot Arizona days. One of my favorites is the Sangiovese made in the true traditional Tuscany way."

On a summer Saturday afternoon, Valley residents looking to escape the heat and enjoy a glass of wine lounged on couches at the winery.

Scottsdale resident Malcolm Atherton says he appreciated the time the Alcantara employees took to explain each wine.

"The atmosphere, service and wine are terrific," he says. "The 2005 Syrah was my favorite. Who doesn't love American oak?"

His wife, Erin Atherton, sips red wine and laughs. "Go for the cooler weather, the beautiful scenery and to get out of the city," she says. "The wine is secondary. I am in it more for the adventure and experience."

Alcantara harvests in August and September, an event visitors are invited to watch. In addition to festivals and farmers markets planned in the next few months, Predmore has blueprints to expand her Italian vision.

"The Tuscan village will be built around the winery, and will consist of the permanent tasting room with bistro, art galleries, cafes and an amphitheatre," she says. "There will always be music, art, good food, exceptional wine and laughter."

Page Springs

Vineyards & Cellars

This place isn't tricky to find if you are familiar with Cornville, or if it is the first winery on your list. If it is your third, and you've got a carload of friends who have been enjoying the day and are, therefore, unable to help read a map, be prepared for potential detours - and the ever-so-helpful "We really should have brought a road atlas," repeated at 5-minute intervals until you find your way.

Tucked between Cottonwood and Sedona, Page Springs is a small, rolling community kept remarkably green by the Verde River. The family-run winery is owned by winemaker Eric Glomski. He began the vineyard in 2003 after apprenticing in California. The winery's official specialty is Rhone-style wines. Unofficially? Its patio is a big hit, especially when late-afternoon storms roll in to entertain visitors, who huddle happily under umbrellas with their glasses.

With a \$10 fruit-and-cheese platter, and a four-wine tasting costing \$8, the afternoon breezes by.

"I'm not a huge wine snob," Scottsdale resident Adam Wright says while enjoying a glass of Page Springs Cellars El Serrano. "This is a bit more my level. The decor is nice but not too nice, the wine is good and the explanations are in plain English, as opposed to 'wine-speak.' "

Wright says making a road trip to wineries in the region is a great getaway, with the right mix of planning - bring a designated driver - and flexibility in your schedule.

"Don't set too tight of an itinerary," he says. "Leave room to relax at places you like and time to get lost and wander. I've seen parts of Arizona on this day trip I would have never otherwise seen. Allowing for some spontaneity makes for a nice day.

"That being said, a map or GPS isn't a terrible idea. Also, take friends with you who will look at it as an adventure and don't mind going off the beaten path or changing the plan midday."

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Post by
 Aug 31 12:42 PM
 What about Maynard James Keenan's winery in this area, Caduceus? I guess Eric Glomski of Page Springs Vineyards & Cellars is his partner, but I think Caduceus should be mentioned here. See link:
<http://www.caduceus.org>

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There is a great winery in Chino Valley. It is a little hard to find but the scenery is amazing and the wine is great.

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Yes Maynard James Keenan!! I haven't tried his wione, but anything he produces you know will be brilliant. TOOL Rocks!!!!

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