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## Amazing Grapes Part II

*Verde Valley has potential to create 'masterpiece' wines*

**By Steve Ayers**

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Monday, November 10, 2008



Steve Ayers/VVN One of the earliest challenges pioneer vineyards have faced is what grapes will grow best in the Verde Valley. Early results indicate that Petite Syrah, Cabernet, Merlot, Zinfandel, and just about anything that grows in Italy, Spain and the Middle East will grow well here.

The Verde Valley is a 35-mile long, 15- to 20-million-year-old drainage, worn through layers of porous sandstone and limestone.

The sedimentary rock, most of which was laid down long before the river began its journey, is perforated and layered with volcanic intrusions that have rocked the landscape for as long or longer than the river has flowed.

Occasionally, these volcanic intrusions blocked the drainage's pathway creating inland lakes, which, over time created an additional layer of calcareous marine sediment known as the Verde formation.

These alkaline sediments and volcanic intrusions, combined with minerals washed down from the surrounding highlands have created ideal soil in which to grow grapes.

Add to the ideal soil a mix of climatic diversity and extreme temperature variations inherent in a desert mountain river valley, and an optimal ratio of altitude to latitude, and you have all the makings to grow world-class wine grapes.

As almost anyone in the wine business can tell you, grapes like the hard life.

Put them in the wide-open fertile expanse of Midwest bottomland and they will disappoint you. Plant them on a rocky and inhospitable hillside and they will thrive.

Like their ultimate consumers, they enjoy an occasional drink -- but less is often better.

Hot days and cold nights bring out their best.

"Stressed grapes make better wines," says Paula Woolsey a wine educator and owner of two valley



Owner and winemaker at Page Springs Cellars, Eric Glomski, has long believed the Verde Valley could produce grapes of equal caliber to those grown in some of the most famous vineyards in the world.

future on volume."

The Verde Valley is on the same latitude as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran, places where grapes were first domesticated and wine first made.

"The varieties of wine grapes we now grow, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and etcetera, all have parentage in the Middle East," Glomski says. "Over time they spread from the Fertile Crescent, but they remain drought-tolerant, heat-loving plants."

For the valley's pioneer growers, the first major obstacle has been finding which grapes do best. Like any region offering such diverse microclimates, they are learning that some varieties thrive where others don't.

"What is doing well here on the Verde is not necessarily going to do as well on Oak Creek," says Barbara Predmore, owner of Alcantara Winery, "but some of the Italian and Spanish varieties are right at home throughout the valley."

As each grower has tried particular varieties, they have willingly shared their knowledge with those who have followed them.

"I had to plant several sections a few times over to find out what works," says Ray Freitas, owner of Freitas Vineyards outside Cottonwood, "but as others have come along I have passed along what I've learned."

Freitas' vines are second in age only to those planted by Jon Marcus at Echo Canyon, and her vineyard is the only one currently producing exclusively estate bottled wines made of grapes grown exclusively on her property.

"I could write a book on my mistakes," she says. "I am still in the process of discovering what works and what doesn't."

Nevertheless, the pioneers have persevered, learning that Petit Syrah is hugely successful, as is Merlot, Cabernet, Zinfandel and some lesser-known Mediterranean varieties like Malvasia and Sangiovese.

The valley has one other characteristic, outside its climate and geology that makes the effort to perfect and expand local vineyards worthwhile.

It is already on "The Map," thanks in large part to the millions of visitors that come each year to Sedona and to a lesser degree Jerome. It is a point not missed on those who are making the investments.

"No one knows where Cottonwood is or Camp Verde for that matter," Woolsey says, "but they all know Sedona. This will work because people come here already. All you have to do is tell them, 'Oh, by the way,

restaurants, "Grapes love a 50-degree variation in temperature over the course of a day. It stresses them."

Grapes can handle a life of less stress but it does little to develop the character and complexity sought by winemakers the world over.

"In Central California they can grow tons of grapes. But the grapes lack interesting characteristics. We have the ability here, because of our weather and soil, to develop those interesting characteristics," Woolsey says.

Page Spring Cellars owner and winemaker Eric Glomski, like everyone else in the valley's nascent wine industry, is quick to point out that it is quality they are seeking, not quantity.

"We have everything we need here to create masterpieces -- liquid landscapes," Glomski says, "We don't want to base our sense of place or our

while you are here why don't you checkout our wineries.' The potential is limitless."

The wine industry is one of those unique businesses where more competition is better. More people come to taste wine if they know they will have more opportunities to do so.

"Competition is a wonderful thing," Javalina Leap owner Rod Snapp says. "In this business, it's the more the merrier. I wish there were a hundred wineries here."

The one remaining question is how to pull off the whole idea. How does the Verde Valley set itself apart from the crowd in a world that is flush with winemakers and wine drinkers?

"We have to be careful how we make this thing work," Woolsey says. "Every state in the union has wineries. Illinois must have 150. Virginia has just as many. Even Idaho has wineries. They are all places that grow grapes, make wine and do it well."

The obvious answer for those making wines is to create great wines, and then the world will beat a path to your barrels -- presumably.

But even they realize it takes more than that. It takes region-wide support focused on promoting all the valley's attributes -- not just to outsiders but also to those who live here and will ultimately be affected by the change in culture that may come with the vines.

Recently, the vineyards have gained the support of individuals, organizations and local governments, all part of a loose-knit group calling itself the Verde Valley Wine Consortium -- all interested in taking the idea as far as it can go.

The members are well aware that the wine industry gives far more than it takes.

And that a little investment on their part will go a long way toward solving some of the larger issues facing the valley -- like growth, water and the all-encompassing issue of sustainability.

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