

## DESERT WINE COUNTRY

There was a time when a trip to a great wine region involved airfare, rental cars and costly hotels or B&Bs. No more. There are now bonded wineries in all 50 states so everyone has a “local” wine country to check out.

What has happened is that the combination of accumulated knowledge and technology has made it possible to grow grapes suitable for fine wines in a variety of climates, many previously considered inappropriate. There are now all sorts of choices of rootstocks to use; these days grapevines and the roots they grow on usually come from different plants and are grafted together. Dozens of different “clones,” which are varieties within varieties, are available for each grape type that can adapt to different growing conditions. There is a tremendous amount of performance data on different vine growing techniques – vine densities, training, trellising and canopy management practices – so new growers have a real leg-up. It might be time to give your local wine country a fresh look.

Most states produce, at a minimum, sound, serviceable, quaffable wines while some craft truly world class juice. I am pleased to say that my state, Arizona, falls in the latter category. That’s right; the state best known for rattlesnakes, scorpions and horrific summer heat produces small quantities of truly spectacular wine. The climate in the areas most people associate with Arizona, Phoenix and Tucson, is indeed too hot to grow the sort of grape varieties that make exceptional wine. But north and south of these cities, higher elevations make for some excellent winegrowing conditions. Arizona wine growers still face plenty of summer heat though, and their wines tend to be very ripe, intense and alcoholic. If that’s your cup of tea you’ll be thrilled with many of the wines from Arizona.

Arizona vineyards grow a little bit of everything. Being a young wine region, about 25 years old, there are still many experimental plantings. Successful wines have been made from grape varieties normally associated with cooler climates; Pinot noir and Riesling are examples. But the varieties associated with warmer climates, Mediterranean varieties such as Syrah, Mourvedre, Grenache, Tempranillo and Sangiovese have performed extremely well. Many producers started out growing Bordeaux varieties since their markets were familiar with wines made from them. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot have done well also. Arizona wine fans certainly have a wide and varied range of products to choose from.

Arizona producers have achieved national attention through wine publications and competitions, garnering awards and favorable reviews. In 2006, both Callaghan’s 2004 Claire’s Cuve and Dos Cabezas’ 2004 Pinot Gris were selected and served at a White House dinner in honor of Justice Sandra Day O’Connor.

There are lots of wonderful wines produced in Arizona, but here are three I would highly recommend:

Callaghan Buena Suerte Cuve. (\$25) Callaghan Vineyards is one of Arizona’s veteran producers and was the first to gain national recognition in Robert Parker’s Wine Advocate newsletter and The Wine Spectator magazine. The Buena Suerte Cuve is the flagship red at Callaghan heading up their red offerings since 1992. It’s a Meritage blend, in most cases, usually built with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Occasionally a non-Bordeaux variety will sneak in; in 1999, for example, the blend included a bit of Syrah. The wine is big, rich and intense with the flavor profiles

varying a bit each vintage. Typically look for rich, ripe cherry-berry flavors with a framework of oak. The wine ages wonderfully; I've tasted 10 year old Buena Suerte that was well integrated and drinking great.

Dos Cabezas Viognier. (\$20) Dos Cabezas is another of the top producers in Arizona with a number of vintages under their belt. The vineyard was established in 1990 and the first vintage was 1995. Ownership changes have divided the label and the vineyards, but the fruit for the 2006 Viognier came from the original Dos Cabezas vineyard. The wine is simply terrific. It's big and rich with spicy grapefruit/pineapple flavors. A great companion for poultry, salmon and pork.

Sonoita Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon. (\$25 - \$50) Sonoita Vineyards is operated by Gordon Dutt, a retired soil scientist from the University of Arizona who single-handedly started the Arizona wine industry. His 1979 research into growing grapevines in the "four corners" states formed the basis of the early Arizona vineyards. The most remarkable wine from Sonoita Vineyards is the Cabernet Sauvignon. The style of Gordon Dutt's red wines was from the beginning more Bordeaux than Arizona. The grapes are harvested a little sooner than most of the other AZ producers resulting in more austere, tannic, less ripe wines. Like Bordeaux. The 2004 Cabernet is powerful and complex with bell pepper, cherry and cassis flavors. The finish is long with plenty of tannin and acid – promising a long life indeed. All Sonoita Vineyards Cabernets age well, the 1990 is drinking wonderfully.

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