

LIFESTYLE: Arizona vintage: Area wineries lead the way in an industry that's seeing a bright future

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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After running, biking and swimming their way across Patagonia, Tucson residents Salvadore Taormina and Amy Jo Ott stopped and tasted the wines in Sonoita.

"There's something about being able to go where its grown, made and tasting the outcome," Ott said. "And I like wine."

Ott and Taormina fit in with a younger demographic, ages 25 to 40, that's "getting into wines," said Rod Keeling, president of the Arizona Wine Growers Association.

They're also appreciating the wines being produced locally.

In other words, Arizona wines aren't your grandmothers wines, Keeling said.

Although Sonoita's soil was found to be similar to the burgundy region of France, that doesn't mean the wine is like French wine. It's more akin to the wines from California and Australia.

"It's big, powerful, fruity, and that's why people like them," Keeling said.

Some critics complain that Arizona wines lack finesse or elegance.

"But in a warmer climate you go with what you got," Keeling said.

With or without finesse, Sonoita and other Arizona wine regions are attracting attention from tourists, local wine lovers and prospective wine makers.

Sonoita wine country's roots began growing in 1973 when Gordon Dutt, a retired soil scientist from the University of Arizona, planted the first experimental crop at the Ignacio Babocomari Ranch. He was pleased with the results, and Dutt started planting commercial vineyards at Sonoita Vineyards in 1979, said Fran Lightly, a wine maker for Sonoita Vineyards.

Sonoita Vineyards is now the oldest producing vineyard in the state.

Throughout the week Sonoita Vineyards offers tastings of seven of their wines, drawing about 180 visitors on a summer weekend. Many are traveling from Tucson and Phoenix to escape the summer heat.

"They've figured out that it's 10 to 20 degrees cooler down here," Lightly said.

They receive about 250 on weekends from January through April, and their three annual festivals, the Blessing of the Vineyard in April, the Augustfest harvest celebration and St. Martin's New Release Festival in November, draw more than 1,000 visitors.

"We sell a lot and pour a lot," Lightly said. "People have learned, around the world, that wine country is a good place to go."

Darin and Lisa Young of Litchfield Park took a day to try some of the wines in southern Arizona for the first time Tuesday after Lisa Young recently read about the region in a Sunset Magazine.

"I was shocked. I'm a native here and I didn't know we had wineries."

The region's attractions don't just include wine.

"It's very green and beautiful. You can tell there's a lot of history here," she said.

Sonoita is one of three areas in the state producing wines. They are:

- The northern region, which includes Sedona, Jerome and Phoenix
- The southern region, which includes Sonoita, Elgin and Patagonia
- And the southeastern region, which includes Fort Bowie, Willcox and Portal.

Arizona's wineries bring the state an estimated \$18 million annually, Keeling said. And, he said, that figure will likely rise since the number of wineries in the state is expected to increase from 26 to 50 in the next three years.

Six vineyards are producing wines, and about five are under development in the Sonoita and Elgin region.

"We kind of sat there waiting for 20 years and now it's really taking off," Keeling said.

Starting a vineyard takes significant investments — about \$30,000 an acre for the vines, and the process, "from conception to bottle," can take about five to seven years. But a positive perception of Arizona wine has been taking shape and attracting prospective wine makers to the region, Keeling said.

The resulting wineries have come in a few different varieties across Arizona. Some are more hospitality focused with a bed-and-breakfast feel and others sole focus is the wine, Keeling said. Some wine makers grow all their grapes and are involved at every step of the process, while others source their wine.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Keeling said. “It’s just their model.”

Inside Sonoita Vineyards, guests can picnic outdoors after trying seven of their wines or take a tour of the winery to see the wine making process, from vine to bottle.

At the Village of Elgin Winery, one of nine wineries in the state solely using Arizona grapes, tasters can try dozens of wines. About 47 wines are produced annually at the winery, said wine master Gary Reeves.

Callaghan Vineyards and Dos Cabezas WineWorks in Sonoita have become known for high-quality wines, Keeling said.

Kent Callaghan, wine maker of Callaghan Vineyards, uses vine-ripened grapes, Keeling said. Though the grapes are more likely to be damaged from birds and weather, the finished product is a better wine.

“If you pick it too early technically it’s OK wine, but not great,” Keeling said.

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