

Southern Arizona Wineries

By Deborah Neff

Who knew it? A great addition to our Arizona food culture, wine growers have found Southern Arizona's high desert regions to be perfect for wine growing. With elevations from 3800 to 5800 feet, wineries have been sprouting up throughout the high deserts of Southern Arizona.

This is not Arizona's saguaro-filled, low deserts, but open and expansive high desert grasslands that one would think (with the cows and all) would have a taste all their own. It may then come as a surprise that, according to the Arizona Wine Growers Association, Arizona's high desert wine regions are similar to wine-growing regions of Ribera Del Duero, Spain; Southeastern Australia; and Southern France; and its soil and climate is almost identical to that of Paso Robles, California.

The suitability of Arizona's soils and climate for growing wine was first discovered in the Sonoita/Elgin region in 1973 by soil scholar Dr. Gordon Dutt, who found the red clay soil to be similar to that of Cote D'Or in Burgundy, France. The oldest Arizona winery, Dutt's Sonoita Vineyards, was established as a commercial vineyard in 1983 and is now one of a growing number of up and coming wineries in the region.

For the delight of wine-tasting for out of state visitors and Arizonans alike, Southern Arizona features two main wine trails, each day-long outings for Tucsonans: the Sonoita/Elgin Wine Trail south of Tucson and southeastern Arizona's Willcox Wine Trail.

Approximately 55 miles south of Tucson between Sonoita and Tombstone (off scenic highway 83), the Sonoita/Elgin Wine trail features 12 vineyards, ranging from small family operations to commercial vineyards. Arizona's only AVA (American Viticultural Area), the region boasts several award-winning wines, including a Cabernet Sauvignon that was served at a Presidential Inauguration.

A newer wine-growing region, Cochise County's Willcox Wine Trail—also featuring 12 wineries, extends from just north of Willcox to just south of Hwy 181. According to the Arizona Wine Growers Association, the region produces Arizona's highest quality grapes.

Wineries are sprouting up just about everywhere in these parts. In Sierra Vista there are 19 established wineries, and Tombstone, Benson, Payson, and Portal are also host to new wineries. Each winery, of course, has its own specialty.

Less crowded than the more established California wineries, visiting Southern Arizona's vineyards is a real treat. Not only are the wines quite good, but the views are gorgeous! With the mountains of Mexico in the distance and the region's open, rolling desert grasslands, this cow and horse country has spawned new wines all our own, such as

“Arizona Sunset” and “Pecan Delight.”

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