



# Arizona Wine Country:

East Valley residents only a short drive away from world-class wineries

By Teresa Bitler

Photos courtesy of "Beaches on Location"

**R**oughly 200 years before Charles Krug planted the first vineyard in Napa Valley, Spanish missionaries tended grapes in Southern Arizona and fermented the juice into wine. But it wasn't until the 1970s that vintners considered producing wines for commercial consumption in Arizona.

Since then, Arizona wines have received accolades from wine critic Robert Parker, the Wall Street Journal, Wine Spectator, The Wine Advocate, Bon Appetit and Food & Wine, and they've been served at the White House and at James Beard House dinners in New York City.

"I truly believe we have the opportunity to become one of the great wine regions in the country," says Peggy Fiandaca, president of the Arizona Wine Growers Association (AWGA). "We have the soils and climate to produce quality, world class wines." Fiandaca points out that Arizona's wineries are still very young and will only get better, adding, "It's a new industry. Our vineyards are still maturing."

The state has come a long way in a short time. Just seven years ago, Arizona claimed less than 10 licensed and bonded wineries, according to the AWGA. Today, it boasts more than 50, with more wineries on the way, including a vineyard near Kingman. And yet, Fiandaca says, many visitors to the state and quite a few locals — are surprised to learn that Arizona produces wines.

"We have three regions in Arizona," she says. "Sonoita is the oldest region, and it has actually been designated an American viticultural area within the United States. Then, there's Willcox in Southern Arizona, and the newest is the Verde Valley near Sedona. There are fine wines being produced in all three regions."



Unique crafts and gifts can be found at many wineries.

One of the best ways to experience Arizona wines is to head to one of the three regions. The AWGA website ([www.arizonawines.com](http://www.arizonawines.com)) provides maps and winery descriptions, while Arizona Vines & Wines ([www.arizonainesandwines.com](http://www.arizonainesandwines.com)) offers additional information on lodging, restaurants and local attractions. Both have links to winery websites. Before you go, verify winery hours.

Fiandaca, who co-owns Lawrence Dunham Vineyards, says that not all wineries have tasting rooms and some may be open by appointment only.

If you'd rather leave the planning — and the driving — to someone else, consider taking a wine tour. Several companies

offer tours with pick-up locations at East Valley resorts and hotels.

Les Rose, owner of Arizona Frontiers, says there are definite advantages to the tours beyond having a designated driver.

"We've selected four wine tasting rooms with a good





Many wineries have cafes and bistros featuring divine food and wine specials.

selection of wines — ones that have very comfortable accommodations,” he explains. “You’ll also have a guide that can tell you about the Sonoran Desert, local history, anthropology and, of course, wines.”

Arizona Frontier’s tour takes wine connoisseurs to Oak Creek Vineyard, Bitter Creek Winery, Caduceus Cellars and Alcantara Vineyards for \$160 per tasting adult. “A lot of people don’t think of Arizona and wines,” Rose says. “This is a really good tour for them. They get a lot of information.”

Detours of Arizona has a similar tour of the Verde Valley region that visits Javelina Leap, Oak Creek Vineyards, Page Springs Cellars and Alcantara Vineyards. The cost is \$170 per adult. They can also offer custom tours of Southern Arizona’s wineries.

But, you don’t have to go far from the East Valley to experience a winery.

Although The Windmill Winery in Florence does not grow its own grapes, it has its own label and carries a collection of more than 100 wines, including some from Arizona, available for tasting and purchase.

“These are wines you won’t find anywhere else,” says Tanya Cataldi, the winery’s events coordinator. “You won’t find them in the grocery store. They’re organic wines and estate wines.”

Cataldi adds that the winery itself isn’t like anything you’ll find in the Valley. Tastings are poured in a red, 1920s dairy barn, and as you tour the property, you’ll find shade trees, stone pathways and two lakes. The winery is open on Thursday, Friday and Saturday from noon to 6 p.m.

While The Windmill Winery makes you feel like you’ve been swept away to a wine-growing region, Kokopelli Winery & Bistro in Chandler actually brings the winery to you. In addition to serving wines from his family



Alcantara Vineyards in the Verde Valley offers breathtaking views for visitors sampling wine.

vineyard near Willcox, owner Dennis Minchella also offers selections from a dozen other Arizona wineries, hosts dinners featuring Arizona winemakers, and invites Arizona wineries to Kokopelli-sponsored events.

Kokopelli Winery & Bistro schedules special events on a monthly basis. For anyone who wants to learn about the winemaking process as well as Arizona wines,

Minchella encourages them to attend the Jazz, Wine, Blues and Barrels event in March. Winemakers from around the state will offer samples straight from the barrel, compare it to the bottled product and answer questions on the winemaking process. “It’s a huge educational experience,” he says.

Minchella’s isn’t the only restaurant in the East Valley to showcase Arizona wines.

Pavle Milic led the emerging trend to focus on state wines when he introduced an all-Arizona wine list (with the exception of a New Mexico sparkling wine) at FnB in 2009. Other restaurants soon took notice. Today, Quiescence Restaurant & Wine Bar has 12 Arizona whites and 14 reds on its list, Kai at Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa has more than a half dozen, and D’Vine in Chandler has four.

If you’d rather enjoy a bottle of Arizona wine in your own home, you have several options. Milic often sends his diners to the Arizona Wine Company to purchase a bottle of the wine they enjoyed with their meal at FnB, and he has recently partnered with Brian Reeder to open AZ Wine Merchants.

Sun Devil Liquors in Mesa carries 14 Arizona wines and offers at least one Arizona wine by the glass in its Cellar Pub downstairs. According to owner Lori Eccles, Arizona wines keep getting better and better. “As a state, we should be proud to have them,” she says.