



Desert Squeezin's

Touring
Arizona's
award-
winning
wineries

■ RICHARD & ELLEN THANE



“Wine makes daily living easier, less harried, with fewer tensions and more tolerance.” That quote, attributed to Benjamin Franklin, succinctly sums up the lifestyle most RV travelers are looking for. After a long day behind the wheel, don't many of us enjoy relaxing with a glass of fine wine, perhaps savoring the memories of another wonderful day?

Touring wineries, then, is simply taking this one step further. Not only does it allow us to explore new regions, but along the way we also get to discover new vintages — and the folks who create them.

When touring Arizona wineries and vineyards, don't expect to see grand chateaus and elegant tasting



Several campgrounds (far left) are within easy distance of Arizona's wineries, so you can spend a weekend or more hunting for the tell-tale grape clusters. Though relatively new, many Arizona wines rival the best vintages by domestic and European winemakers. Elgin Winery, like most in the region, offers wine-tasting for a nominal fee.

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rooms. Instead, you will encounter small family operations with friendly wine-makers and grape-growers always ready to share their passion for winemaking.

You'll also find some very good wines, several rivaling the best vintages put out by European or California winemakers. Of course, you'll find some bad wines, too — but then, that's part of the adventure of wine-tasting.

Arizona has grown grapes and produced wine since the days of the Jesuit missions in the 17th century, but the recognition of

than a dozen in all. We managed to visit more than half, kicking off our tour in the Sonoita-Elgin area (about one hour southeast of Tucson on State Highway 83).

Our first stop was at The Village of Elgin Winery,

which basically comprises the entire town of Elgin. Housed in an 1895 building that was once a bordello, the winery is owned by Gary and Kathy Reeves, who make about 45 different wines each year, mostly from grapes grown

on their own 103-acre vineyard. They are always experimenting with different blends to create new wines, using only Arizona-grown grapes. The Reeves also assist other grape-growers in making their own wine, "provided," Gary says, "they grow a quality grape."

Numerous wines from the Village of Elgin Winery (and its parent company, Domaines Ellam) are award-winners that are sold around the world. A \$1 tasting fee entitles you to a sip of four wines; afterward, we took home a bottle of 2000 Sauvignon Blanc and served it with a quiche. Wonderful!

Located less than three miles outside Elgin, Callaghan Vineyards has 21 acres in grapes. Callaghan vines were first planted in the spring of 1990; by 1992, owner Kent Callaghan was making wine from his own grapes.

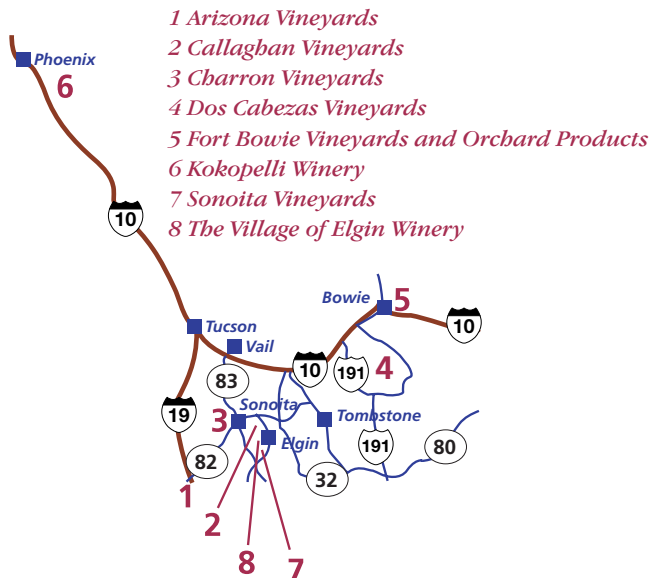
Planted initially to a



southern Arizona as a major grape-growing and wine-producing region is a fairly recent phenomenon. During the 1970s, Dr. Gordon Dutt, a geology professor at the University of Arizona, realized that the climate and red soil of the Sonoita area south of Tucson was very similar to that enjoyed by grape-growing regions in Spain, Italy, France and California. He planted Arizona's first commercial vineyard in 1979, earning himself the title "father of Arizona wine."

Though most of Arizona's wineries tend to be clustered in the southern end of the state — thus sharing the same favorable climate as Dutt's original Sonoita-area vineyard — others are located in a Phoenix suburb and even as far northwest as Kingman. There are more

Al Buhl (left), principal owner of Dos Cabezas Vineyards, bottles Pinot Grigio, while his counterpart at Arizona Vineyards, Tino Ocheltree (above), pours wine for a guest. During August Fest, children (and adults!) can be seen stomping grapes at Sonoita Vineyards. Leo Cox (right), owner of Charron Vineyards, only makes about 350 cases of white merlot annually.



Bordeaux-style grape, Callaghan wines have evolved over the years to reflect the unique taste created from the intensely flavored grapes grown in Arizona soils under the hot desert sun. Highly acclaimed by some of the country's leading wine critics, Callaghan Vineyards is now being marketed in more than a dozen states and several European countries.

We enjoyed the informality of the Callaghan tasting room, where a \$3 tasting fee included the goblet and a

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choice of 10 to 11 wines. We departed with several bottles, as well as a beautiful cookbook authored and signed by Kent's mother, Karen, containing recipes from her Wine Country Restaurant.

It was August Fest the day we visited Sonoita Vineyards. Owned by the aforementioned professor, Gordon Dutt, the winery and tasting room are housed in a Spanish-style building, definitely the most scenic winery on our tour. We took a tractor-drawn wagon tour of the vineyard, where we learned that Dr. Dutt first planted his grapes in 1979 only to have the vines wiped out a few years later by Pierce's disease. Starting over, he planted grapes resistant to the disease — along with more rose bushes. We were told that both grape vines and roses are subject to a powdery mildew, but roses get it first — giving grape-growers time to spray the grapes before they are damaged.

Like several of the other wineries in the region, Charron Vineyards is located off State Highway 83 east of Sonoita — but it wasn't the easiest place to find. We could see the grape vines, growing lush and green on the hillside, but the entrance is not signed. As you leave the highway (between mileposts 51 and 52), you have a choice of several rough dirt roads heading off in the general direction of the vineyards. Our second choice was the right road, and we were thankful we were driving our dinghy.

Once there, owner Leo Cox welcomed us openly; we spent several delightful hours in his Arizona room overlooking his vineyards and the hazy Santa Rita Mountains in the distance. He poured us a glass of his only wine, a delicious white merlot, and as we enjoyed it, he filled us in on the history of the Arizona wine industry and his vineyard.

After retiring, Leo followed up on an interest in grape-growing acquired while living and working in Spain. After years of searching for just the right spot, he settled on a lovely site on the western slopes of the Empire Mountains. In 1994, with his age approaching seven decades, he single-handedly planted his vineyard.

He only makes about 350 cases of his white merlot annually; each year's release is often spoken for well

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in advance. Everything from the picking of the grapes to the labeling of the bottles is done by hand.

Leaving Charron, we headed south on State Highway 82 almost to the Arizona-Mexico border where, just outside Nogales, we found Arizona Vineyards. A popular tourist spot, the site has a large parking lot that accommodates motorhomes of all sizes. The quaint, dimly lit winery building houses an abundance of winemaking memorabilia, along with an eclectic collection of carved wooden figures from old Bali temples.

Winemaker and owner Arthur “Tino” Ocheltree says he makes his wines in the “old family European style” — but uses interesting local names. His tasting bar offers choices ranging from Rattlesnake Red to Sweet Killer Bee.

As you explore the countryside and the wineries of this region, plan to lunch in your rig; restaurant choices in this part of the country can be quite limited.

Moving on to the farming community of Wilcox, southeast of Tucson along Interstate 10, we used our *Trailer Life Campgrounds, RV Parks & Services Directory* to find a campground. The following morning, we headed southeast on State Highway 186, looking for Dos Cabezas Vineyards.

This winery is the result of three friends' passion for winemaking. Al Buhl is the winery's principal owner and serves as vineyard manager; Frank DiChristofano is the winemaker; and Sam Pillsbury adds his expertise in marketing. We found the three of them bottling a very good Pinot Grigio the day of our visit.

Walking out among the vines with their heavy purple clusters, I asked Sam why an RV traveler would come all the way to visit Dos Cabezas.

“Why, the RV traveler loves adventure,” he explained. “Just look over there,” he noted, pointing to the mountains on the horizon. “That’s Cochise’s stronghold, the place where his Apaches held off the U.S. Army for years. Over there,” he continued, pointing in the opposite direction, “is the famed Chiricahua Mountains. Down the road is the old ghost town, Dos Cabezas. You passed Kartchner

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Caverns on the way down here and Tombstone, one-time home of Wyatt Earp, is just a few miles away...this place reeks of history.

"Besides," he added with a wink, "We make good wine."

Dos Cabezas wines, made strictly by hand, have received some impressive awards. The old machine shop now housing the winery doesn't have a tasting room, but give them a call in advance and they'll set up a tasting session. We left with a bottle of Cochise County 2001, a very good Cabernet.

Continuing east along I-10, we entered the old town of Bowie just before the New Mexico border — home to Fort Bowie Vineyards and Orchard Products. As the name intimates, the wine shop sells more than wine; on the day of our visit, boxes of ripe peaches filled the store with their irresistible scent. Everything comes from the nearby family farm, where owners Dick and Cody Eastman grow

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pecans, walnuts, grapes, peaches and cherries. We enjoyed the wines, which are blended and bottled in New Mexico, and added a bottle of sparkling wine made with a touch of pecan oil to our growing collection.

If you're making a single loop of Arizona's wineries, Fort Bowie is a good place to end (or start). We elected to wrap up our tour by heading northwest to Chandler, on the southern edge of Phoenix, where we were welcomed by a place with a feast for the eyes as well as the tongue.

Entering The Bistro at Kokopelli Winery, we were greeted by an arrangement of beautiful wine bottles in a variety of shapes and colors as well as by the scents of European-style soups and sandwiches. A sign on the door proclaims this to be the local newspaper's choice for "Best Lunch in the City of Chandler."

Winners of many awards, Kokopelli is best known for its Sweet Lucy,

a refreshing, sweet red wine enjoyed just as it is or for making Sangria. The winery has ample parking at the rear of the building for even the largest motorhomes; a gentle ramp provides access for visitors with a variety of needs.

Whether you just make a loop through the Sonoita-Elgin area during a weekend jaunt or opt to visit each of Arizona's wineries, this is an excursion well worth the effort. We found

the terrain changing from luxuriant Sonoran Desert to high-chaparral country, and it was all magnificent.

Remember, though, to do your homework and make appointments with each winery before visiting; hours vary and some can be difficult to find. All of the winemakers and vineyard managers are great hosts, however, and will make sure your visit is an enjoyable one. ■

For More Info

- Arizona Wine Growers Association, (480) 315-9350, arizonawine.org.
- Arizona Vineyards, (520) 287-7972.
- The Bistro at Kokopelli Winery, (480) 792-6927, kokopelliwinery.com.
- Callaghan Vineyards, (520) 455-5322, callaghanvineyards.com.
- Charron Vineyards, (520) 762-8585, charronvineyards.com.
- Dos Cabezas Vineyards, (520) 455-5369, doscabezaswinery.com.
- Fort Bowie Vineyards & Orchard Products, (888) 299-5951, fortbowievineyards.com.
- Sonoita Vineyards, (520) 455-5893, sonoitavineyards.com.
- The Village of Elgin Winery, (520) 455-9309, elginwines.com.
- For additional state travel information: Arizona Tourism, (866) 275-5816, arizonaguide.com. *Circle 211 on Reader Service Card.*