

# GRAPE PERSPECTIVES: THE VERDE VALLEY WINE CONSORTIUM

ARTICLE BY TOM PITTS, PRESIDENT VERDE VALLEY WINE CONSORTIUM  
& OWNER OF BELGIAN JENNIE'S BORDELLO BISTRO & PIZZERIA IN JEROME

I went to school in Tucson and then began the process of wandering around the planet re-inventing myself before returning to Arizona to semi-retire in 2005. An inveterate wine enthusiast, I joined numerous wine and food societies. I served as a Bailli (Chapter President) and National Board Member for the (Paris-based) *Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs*. I was a Cellarmaster for the (London-based) *International Wine and Food Society*. I was actively involved with the *Commanderie des Bordeaux*, the *Jurade de Saint-Émilion*, the *Confrérie Saint-Etienne* (Alsace), the *Confrérie des Vignerons de Saint-Vincent* (Burgundy), the *Brotherhood of the Knights of the Vine* (U.S.), and a number of others, including Italian and German societies. I lived in Italy for two years and have spent time in wine regions in France, Italy, Germany, Australia, and throughout North America. I have taught wine courses, written numerous articles about wine, and have provided marketing consultation for importers, distributors, and retail chains. I have served on many tasting panels. I like good wine and I have been fortunate to taste a great deal of it from the finest wine producers all over the world, visiting many of their vineyards, wineries, and cellars. When I moved to Jerome, I assumed that I would leave that part of my life behind. I am happy to say that I was wrong.

I joined the Jerome Chamber of Commerce and became a principal in the Sedona Verde Valley Tourism Council (SVVTC). I became a Director of the Verde Valley Regional Economic Organization (VVREO), our regional economic development group. With the City of Cottonwood taking the initial lead, the Verde Valley Wine Consortium was formed in June of 2008, as a trade group dedicated to the growth of the industry in our area. I was selected to chair the group, with VVREO serving as an incubator.

We met with state, county, and local officials to begin the education process and raise awareness of the new industry. With SVVTC we worked to increase our visibility. As a result, the Arizona Office of Tourism now recognizes Verde Valley wineries (through the Consortium) as a "Destination Driver" bringing visitors to the region.

We began working with Yavapai College and less than a year after our first Consortium meeting the first course began. A year later seven wine classes had sold out and the first acre of vines

had been planted on campus. In October of 2010, the college approved a two year certificate program in viticulture, the first and only program of its kind in the state. Next: an on-campus winery and enology program.

Last year, the University of Arizona's Erik Glenn began conducting an evaluation of the economic contributions being made by the Verde Valley wine industry. While the final study has not quite been completed as this is being written, he has shared some data with us. All figures refer to the fiscal year ending June 30, 2010. Local wineries, vineyards and tasting rooms employ 124 people with a payroll over \$2 million. Their direct economic output is about \$5.5 million. Total spending with other private firms totaled more than \$6.5 million during FY 2009-10 with about \$3 million of that business-to-business spending for capital expenditures. Verde Valley winemakers made more than \$81,500 in charitable contributions during this time period. The total of all economic output in Yavapai and Coconino Counties related to Verde Valley wineries/vineyards/tasting rooms, their suppliers and their employees (i.e. the sum of the direct,

indirect and induced impacts) is almost \$8.5 million. Value added, a measure of net economic contribution, is over \$3.9 million. Another \$870,000 in economic activity was generated in the other 13 Arizona counties. An estimated \$9.75 million dollars in additional economic activity was generated in Yavapai and Coconino Counties due to Verde Valley wine sales and Verde Valley wine tourism that take place outside the wineries and tasting rooms. The total of all economic activity in Arizona related to Verde Valley wine for this time period is estimated to be over \$19.1 million, and growing rapidly.

Of course, none of this is possible if the quality of the wine won't hold up to scrutiny. It does. Verde Valley wines have been doing extremely well in competitions all over the country. In fact, the biggest need at the moment is for more Arizona-grown fruit. The demand is far exceeding the supply and, with the necessary lead time to bring vineyards into production, it will be quite a while before a sufficient amount of new production will be able to meet that demand.

I'm pleased that the Verde Valley Wine Consortium has been able to contribute to this growth process. (And here I thought I'd left the wine world behind.)



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Photo courtesy of Donna Chester