

VERDE VALLEY WINES: WORTH A VISIT

If you feel like you've been hearing a lot about Verde Valley wines lately, you're not alone. But it's not the first time people have noticed that this area is particularly well-suited for growing grapes. The Yavapai Indians have been growing grapes in the Verde Valley for more than 3,000 years. The Hohokam came into the area in about A.D. 300 and began irrigating the entire valley to increase production, enjoying the fruits of their labor until they departed shortly after the first millennium. You can see remnants of their canals at Montezuma's Well.

After the Hohokam left, the Sinagua moved down from above the Mogollon Rim and continued farming while building an amazing array of structures until they left in about 1425. Anyone who has hiked Sycamore Canyon and the myriad of trails around Sedona can attest that Montezuma's Castle and Tuzigoot are not the only ruins they left behind. After the Sinagua departed, the Yavapai continued to grow grapes and other crops, finding the soil and the climate particularly well-suited to their needs.

When Antonio de Espejo arrived in 1583, he encountered so many grapes that he originally called the Verde River Rio de las Parras, the "river of the grapevines." He reported that it was hard to get to the water because the vines grew in such profusion. After mining started in Jerome in the 1870s, the Europeans who came to work there created a market for wine and *vitis vinifera* vines were planted on the slopes in Jerome, in West Sedona and along Oak Creek. Heinrich Schuerman, an early Sedona immigrant from Germany, became the first major commercial grower in the area in the 1880s. He planted his vineyards and orchards where the Native Americans had dug what he called "primitive irrigation systems." Apparently they were sufficient for his purposes, and he prospered. Arizona wines were reportedly of high quality and were well-respected until the state adopted Prohibition in 1915, five years before national Prohibition took effect. In fact, Schuerman could not believe that anyone could pass such a law and was arrested when he continued to sell his wine. Between Prohibition, the Great Depression and the closure of the mines in Jerome, grape growing and winemaking were pretty much forgotten in the Verde

Valley. And so it remained until the early 1990s.

Jon Marcus started the ball rolling when he bought acreage near Page Springs Road in 1993. He started building his Echo Canyon Winery in 1996, initially with help from Rod Snapp and Eric Glomski before they began their own projects. During that time, Maynard Keenan began planting grapes in Jerome, and he met Eric. They began making plans for the future. Rod began his Javelina Leap Vineyards in 2001, and Eric got Page Springs Cellars rolling in 2004. In the meantime, Ray Freitas was planting grapes outside of Cottonwood near the Verde River. In 2005, Bob and



Barbara Predmore began Alcantara Vineyards at the confluence of Oak Creek and the Verde River. The Jerome Winery and Oak Creek Vineyards opened. Caduceus Cellars, Merkin Vineyards and Arizona Stronghold joined the parade, and the end is nowhere in sight.

In June 2008, the Verde Valley Wine Consortium (VVWC) was formed. The group has provided support for the development of the wine education programs at Yavapai College, which keeps adding new courses and expects to plant its first on-campus vine-

yard this spring. VVWC has raised awareness of the importance of the industry in both the public and private sectors. It has publicized our region's wineries in earnest as evidenced by the massive press support you may have seen. The University of Arizona is nearing completion of an economic impact study of the Verde Valley wine industry. And the Arizona Office of Tourism has recognized the Verde Valley wineries as a "destination driver" for tourism. For further information, please visit www.verdevalleywineconsortium.com. Now the Verde Valley Wine Trail, a consumer-oriented Web site, has joined the fray. Keeping track of all of the new developments and events in the area can be a challenge. We now have eight winery-operated tasting rooms, with more to open soon. New events are constantly cropping up. See www.vvwinetrail.com for maps and directions, calendars, schedules, special event announcements and more. Of course, none of these efforts mean anything if the wine is not top-notch. It is. If you haven't tasted any of our local wines lately, do yourself a favor and pick up a bottle to take home. You'll be glad you did - you can thank me later.

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