



[ARIZONA]

DRY WINE

*Americans have embraced a spirit of pioneering when it comes to winemaking, writes **Lucy Holden**, and the state of Arizona is thriving as a wine destination*

10HR 55MIN

Flight time
from London to
Phoenix, Arizona

700,000

Gallons of wine
that have been
produced in
Arizona since
2015

THE FIRST THING you should know about wine tasting in Arizona is that before you set off and long after you return, you'll be explaining to many people how exactly you found a vineyard in a desert. Wedged between California and New Mexico in the southwest of the USA, Arizona is most famous for being the Grand Canyon state. It's also infamous for its searing heat. From the aeroplane window, I spy a desert-dry landscape from which Mexico is visible on a good day. The entire state looks like a giant tray of syrupy flapjacks from this height.

JUST DESERTS:

[above] A galvanised steel Quonset hut situated among the vines at Los Milics winery in Elgin in the fertile hills of southern Arizona

As we drop below the clouds, it morphs into the scrubby stubble of an unshaven man's face and, then, lower still, into an advert for swimming pools. Turquoise water drops like tears onto every back garden in sight.

In summer, Arizona's dry heat ranges between 32°C and 48°C. It can get so hot that people feed water to rattlesnakes, dripping it along their scales until they are hydrated enough to slither off. I arrive in December, off-season, when the mornings are chilly but still not coat-cold. The sun shines more than it rains, but the ➤



➤ occasional uncertain drizzle – the state receives about an inch of rainfall on average during the winter – seems to brighten the locals’ mood.

When it comes to vineyards, you can grow anything with enough water. Mountainous hills line the outskirts of the state, and snow-capped peaks offer reliable natural irrigation. The run-off may have a way to go to reach the vineyards, but harnessing natural water supplies has proven an effective way to grow crops for the last 5,000 years, and irrigation channels were already set up in the state for the famous ‘three sisters’ method. “Are we meeting them?” I ask. “You just ate one,” says Margey Magnusson (our Fargo-named tour guide), pointing to a ravished corn on the cob. The ‘three sisters’ is an ancient American planting method that thrives on mutually beneficial plant diversity, and here means corn, beans, and squash growing together with sororal love.

STANDING SENTINEL: [above] A row of columns in the background of grape vines planted at Los Milics winery in Elgin, Arizona

Sonoita-Elgin is the first region in Arizona to have been awarded the coveted American Viticultural Area (AVA) designation and boasts over 15 wineries

After one night of recuperation in Phoenix, we’re off to wine country. Over five days, we visit seven vineyards and tasting rooms, and the scenery rolls from flat, arid dustscapes to shrubby, snaking roads, then khaki-green national parks teeming with black turkey and coatimundi. Margey points out various attractions between vineyards, like the first-ever McDonald’s drive-through and an ostrich farm where stingrays swim about in a pool. “It’s something different for sure,” sings Margey. Welsh Dave, our driver, who arrived first as an exchange student and then returned to marry a girl (now speaking like Lester Nygaard and describing himself as a mongrel), cranks Shania Twain up in the air-conditioned minibus. He uses the expression ‘heck yes’ a lot.

Unlike European wine regions, where vineyards tend to follow the same architectural approaches with unchanging landscapes, in Arizona, each winery is unique; the barren landscape offers plucky winemakers the opportunity to push the boundaries and break the rules. We start in **Elgin** (about an hour’s drive south of Tucson) at the architectural dream site Los Milics, where vines grow on all sides of the small-plate restaurant.

Los Milics is breathtakingly modern, all mirrors and steel, while Elgin itself shimmers with its new reputation

as the fastest-growing wine region in America. Los Milics is producing award-winning wines, has views of the Mustang Mountains and a wine on the menu dedicated to Sandra Day O’Connor, the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court, who happens to have died the morning we arrive (to global headlines). I raise a toast to Sandra and buy a bottle to take home. It’s a lovely rosé for red wine drinkers; a blend of petit verdot, montepulciano



📷 (bar) Bill Steen; (vineyard & grapes) Bruce Racine



DRINK IT IN: [from left] Dos Cabezas Wineworks in Sonoita; pouring a glass at Coronado in Willcox, Arizona; tending the fruit at Los Milics in Elgin

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL VALLEY HO

Nestled in Old Town Scottsdale, Hotel Valley Ho features beautiful open-plan suites leading onto huge balconies with views of the mountains, distant Phoenix and the hotel’s double-swimming-pooled grounds. The mid-century architecture is so striking that the hotel even hosts its own architectural tour. For sustenance, head to the seasonal southwestern restaurant Zuzu, which is shaking up the Scottsdale dining scene. Otherwise, drink on loungers by the vast pool and then visit the spa, where massages and facials help recalibrate the wine-soaked, travel-weary soul. *From £180 per night; hotelvalleyho.com*

ARIZONA SUNSET INN AND SUITES

Is it even an American road trip if you don’t stay at a roadside motel? For anyone stopping off in Willcox, the Arizona Sunset Inn and Suites is a great place to hang your hat. Perfect for kicking back after a long drive and maybe a few too many glasses of local vino, it’s been given a refit to bring it up to speed with contemporary aesthetics and modern conveniences. It’s worth staying for the breakfast alone (or to cosplay True Romance, or any other Great American Road Trip film for that matter).

From £98 per night; arizonasunsetinn.com

and vermentino that results in a serious, grownup wine lacking the teeth-jittering sweetness I used to regret buying from the Co-op aged 18. Tempranillo, syrah and grenache vines also grow well here. We’re informed that wine from Arizona is lesser known to Brits because 80-90% of it is drunk right here in the United States – it doesn’t have time to leave the country.

Our next stop is Wineworks at Sonoita, which is definitely the ‘fun’ winery of the trip – the after party of Los Milics. Owned and run by super cool couple Kelly and Todd Bostock, dubbed “wine-makers to watch” in 2015 and certainly doing something worthy of that title now, this is where you come to drink, not just gargle. They “sling pizza on the crushpad” to mop up the booze. The cool, casual main room is lined with dusty, meaningful bottles. “That one was from our honeymoon,” Todd tells me, gesturing to one. “That one I took to the hospital when our first child was born,” he points to another. Kelly didn’t get to try that one – the ➤

THE SCENERY ROLLS FROM FLAT, ARID DUSTSCAPES TO NATIONAL PARKS WITH BLACK TURKEY AND COATIMUNDI



THE HILLS HAVE VINES: [above] Located in the far south of Arizona not far from the Mexican border, Coronado Vineyards is making a wide range of wine

half bottle was enjoyed very quickly, he admitted. At Dos Cabezas, it becomes clear that Americans – without a history of centuries-old vineyards and all the habits and orthodoxies that crop up with tradition – feel a pioneering freedom in winemaking. Many of Bostock’s wines are blends, the same as Los Milics, and it’s essentially a process of trial and error that is still in its infancy. “Syrah does very well here,” Todd explains. “And everyone loves a magnum,” he says, pouring us a chilled glass from a gigantic bottle. Essentially, they’re learning what works in this arid landscape as they go along.

We stay that night in Willcox, an hour’s drive from Dos Cabezas, and the next morning, we wake to squawking cranes commuting to breakfast in the sky above. The day sees three tastings. “Is that too many?” Fargo Margey asks us. We agree you can’t have too many tastings on a wine-tasting tour of a region where 75% of the state’s wine grows. The sandy land, classified as prairie, makes the terroir unique. Add cool weather and an elevation of over 4,300 feet, and Arizona wine’s ‘how and why’ becomes deliciously straightforward.

There are three vineyards on the itinerary today: Coronado Vineyards (the ‘cool’ one, where locals sit outside in the sun, drinking and listening to music played on their phones); Birds and Barrels (the stand-at-

the-counter, ‘casual’ one); and Strive Vineyards tasting rooms, which sits down the road in an old bank.

At Coronado, mountains loom beyond the vines, and the tasting rooms occupy what looks like a large ranch house (this is the only award-winning African and Native American family-owned vineyard in Arizona). Their reds and sweet wines are a highlight, and by the end of the day, I’ve come to understand that I’ll have to leave all my clothes behind to fit the bottles into my suitcase.



THE PETIT MANSENG IS AS RICH AND SMOOTH AS A LEMON POSSET AND A WHITE PAPER BAG OF PEAR DROPS

A petit manseng from Birds and Barrels is like no white wine I’ve ever experienced. It’s as rich and smooth as a lemon posset and a white paper bag of pear drops. We wrap up the afternoon at Strive, which is the perfect way to punctuate a day touring some of the region’s best wineries. In stark contrast to our levels of alcohol consumption, we learn that the old mayor of Willcox is called Jim Sober – and he was actually sober.

The following morning takes us to Gilbert, the most buzzing of anywhere we’ve been. Packed with bars, restaurants, shops and young people, it’s the kind of place that warrants lunch and a bar crawl wander. Our whistlestop tour ends with a beautiful supper club event at Garage-East, Gilbert’s farm-vineyard, just a short drive away. “We think Arizona is super cool because we’re growing a lot of what can’t be grown in Oregon or France,” says owner and winemaker Meg Ruffentine. “Like America, the wines are young and new. We specialise in orange and red wine and we’re just a 1,000-case operation at the moment. America’s getting local.”

Two hours’ drive from Gilbert lies the cutely named Cottonwood, home to the Alcantara vineyard. This is a sit-outside affair, allowing us to soak up the toasting winter sun. We walk through the vines to a tiny beach next to the Verde River, above which bald eagles nest. We are told you can arrive at the vineyard by horse or by kayak. All is quiet in December, and even the fish slipping about in the clear waters look cold. Here, the owners saw Tuscany in the landscape and planted 17 varieties they hoped would work as well: sangiovese, zinfandel and other reds so full-bodied people could drink them with a straw, says Ron, chief grower, who wears a cowboy hat and an ‘I’ll never settle down’ vibe. “Winemaking is a bit like dating. It takes time to understand whether a variety will work,” he says. At Alcantara, they are helping it along with a “funky” compost of kombucha, marijuana wood chips, beer, horse manure and pomace (grape skins). It’s about as zero-waste an enterprise as they come. Barbera vines grow happily to a soundtrack of crickets.

Scottsdale, with its beautiful Old Town, provides the finale for an exceptional wine-tasting trip. Prickly pear margaritas are a must-drink speciality in these parts, and a stroll through the historic centre is well worth it – be sure to drop into the wine collective which sells almost all of the wine we’ve experienced since we took off from Phoenix a few days before. One of the great things about travelling for wine is you can bring a bit of the landscape home with you. Pop that cork and you’re often right back in the dry desert air, nosing a powerful glass of red. Go big at the collective and you’ll get the added value of enjoying a game of suitcase-packing Tetris, as I did. ♦

POOL YOUR RESOURCES: [right] Sunloungers at the chic Hotel Valley Ho, located in Old Town Scottsdale, situated on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona



WHAT TO SEE

KARTCHNER CAVERNS STATE PARK

This cave is like nothing you may ever see again. Discovered in November 1974 when Gary Tenen and Randy Tufts were exploring the limestone foothills of the Whetstone Mountains, they kept it secret for four years before eventually telling the property owners in 1978. Come see it for yourself: stalactites descend like jellyfish, and stalagmites pool like huge camemberts on the cave floor.

CHIRICAHUA NATIONAL MONUMENT

Many national park-style places in the United States are called “monuments” until they are awarded a higher status, and this one is “all about the rocks,” says ranger Susan. Wildlife may be a major draw, but the valley of rock at the top of the monument (take the Massai Point nature trail), a result of a dramatic volcanic eruption and the subsequent ash cloud, is reason enough to visit in itself.

THE REX ALLEN COWBOY MUSEUM

Run by several uber-fans of the famous home-time cowboy who blazed a trail on the silver screen with his accomplished acting and singing, this tiny, two-room museum is a real hoot, sort of like the museum analogue of a groupie throwing their underwear at the stage. Opened in 1989 to honour the eponymous cowboy, it’s possibly the most surreal place you’ll ever experience.

GILBERT RIPARIAN PRESERVE

Pelicans drift like synchronised swimmers along the waters at this beautiful park; sometimes, it almost appears as though their dives for food were choreographed. There are also more hummingbirds here than anywhere else in the world. Visit for sunrise and snap some insane pictures of the towering cacti.

CHEESEBURGERS AT THE HORSESHOE IN BENSON

This cowboy-heavy diner is bursting with locals and serves cheeseburgers as big as your head. You may face long wait times (possibly shortened by wearing a Stetson, like everyone else), but it’s worth it for the chocolate milkshakes and the waitress, who has ‘MOM’ tattooed on her bicep.

APPLE ANNIE’S COUNTRY STORE

This place is a great spot to have a picnic lunch (and pie) before visiting the national monument below. Stay for the compliments on your accent from the young locals who work here and want to talk about snow.

MONTEZUMA CASTLE NATIONAL MONUMENT

What a feat of human effort. The historic Native American dwelling is carved out of an ancient limestone cliff high up and accessed by ladders. I strongly recommend a short walk and history chat with Ranger Ken.

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