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Tribune

EAST VALLEY • SCOTTSDALE

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From the Cellar: Arizona wine country keeps pouring the good stuff

By Mark Nothaft
For the Tribune

Who knew that once you labor through the Interstate 10 construction zone in central Tucson and make your way to Highway 83 and into the rolling countryside that one of the most interesting - and unexpected - wine producing regions awaits.

Indeed, most don't know about Arizona's "wine country," which stretches roughly from Patagonia in the south to Sonoita and Elgin at its core to Benson in the north. There are secondary wine growing areas in the Verde Valley and near Sedona, but southern Arizona is where all the action is.

The topography in this area in Santa Cruz and Cochise counties resembles ranch land more than farm country with an arid, grassy landscape made drier by frequent strong winds. I envision Wyatt Earp riding up on horseback, not Robert Mondavi. But maybe that's what we have here in the form of Kent Callaghan, the no-nonsense ringmaster of Arizona's wine producing region. He single-handedly put Arizona on the winemaking map with his well-made reds and nuanced whites. His signature Callaghan Vineyards Buena Suerte and Claire's red blends have even been served at three White House dinners.

Do yourself a favor and visit Arizona's wine country first-hand. The area is rugged and somewhat remote, yet beautiful, and makes for a wonderful weekend getaway filled with romantic B&Bs, winery tours and fine food and wine.

Sonoita serves as a great base camp. At nearly 5,000 feet elevation, the temperature rarely tops 100 degrees. Check into Sonoita Inn, at the crossroads of state Highways 83 and 82, and get a feel for the area's ranching past. The building was built by the owner of famed racehorse Secretariat, and the equestrian/Western theme is carried throughout. Rooms are about \$170 per night, but you receive \$50 of that back in the form of dining credit in the inn's steakhouse. The rate also includes a continental breakfast and wine and cheese tastings on weekends.

From the inn, a good place to start tasting is at the cluster of vineyards near Elgin. Travel east on Highway 82 and turn right at the Elgin turnoff. Sonoita Vineyards, Callaghan, Canello Hills and others are here. Sonoita Vineyards was one of the first to set up shop here, and the tasting room is one of the best. The second floor deck offers tremendous views of the vineyards and surrounding countryside. Chill down a bottle of the Arizona Sunset rosé or perhaps Sonoita's colombar and slip it into a picnic basket. Afterwards, you must mosey over Callaghan Vineyards tasting room down the road and be prepared to sample a true expression of Arizona wine. On the white side, Lisa's Selection, a blend of viognier, riesling, marsanne and other French varieties, is consistently good. Caitlin's and Buena Suerte, if available, are musts among the reds.

Back in town, sip a few award-winning wines at Dos Cabezas Wineworks and eat at another expression of the wine country culture at Café Sonoita, the best restaurant in town. Local ingredients and dishes like sautéed jumbo shrimp

with blue cheese tomato cream show the culinary intent of the kitchen. The cafe delivers it all with small-town warmth. It's a good place to sample local wines, as many are on the solid wine list.

Wine lovers need to take the trip and see - and taste - for themselves what's happening in Arizona's burgeoning wine country. For more information, visit www.arizonawine.org [<http://www.arizonawine.org>] or www.sonoitaelginchamber.org [<http://www.sonoitaelginchamber.org>].

Best of Arizona

At the eighth annual Governor's Choice wine awards banquet earlier this year, the state's best wines for 2007 were announced:

Best red: Dos Cabezas Wineworks 2006 El Norte

Best white: Dos Cabezas Wineworks 2006 Viognier

Best blush: Village of Elgin Winery Non-Vintage Dry Rose

Best dessert: Colibri Vineyards Non-Vintage Late Harvest Roussane

Got a wine- and spirits-related question you'd like to see addressed in a column? Contact Mark at mknothft@cox.net [<mailto:mknothft@cox.net>].



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