

Travel: Willcox weekend

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A visit to Willcox will revolve around things that grow.

Southeast Arizona has the largest variety of direct-sales farms in the state, which means the family can pack up, head out, and pick fruits and vegetables just like their grandparents did.

It also has wineries and vineyards that produce genuinely high-quality wines.

In mid-October temperatures are definitely cooler than Phoenix, aided by Willcox's 4,100-foot altitude, which can make mornings and evenings pleasantly chilly.

Apple Annie's

Last weekend we made a return trip to Apple Annie's Orchard and the nearby produce farm just outside of Willcox. At this time of year the orchards are producing red delicious, Granny Smith and pink lady apples, as well as Asian and Bartlett pears.

Annie Holcomb (yes, there really is an Apple Annie) recommends Granny Smith for pies, and all apples are suitable for eating out of hand. You can pick your own or choose what you want from the farm stands.

The gift shop is well stocked with homemade butters, salsas, pies, apple bread, muffins and cookies baked daily. Samples are offered freely. A taste that immediately enticed us to go for more was a spoonful of pumpkin pie ice cream, made the old-fashioned way in a churn with ice and a wood dasher.

Weekends are the best time to go, because the Burger Barn is open, serving apple-smoked burger lunches and, of course, slices of apple pie.

About five miles down the road Apple Annie's Produce & Pumpkins is ablaze with the great orange orbs. Families can hop on a hayride from the pumpkin barn to the pumpkin patch to pick their own, which will range from \$2 for a manageable child-size pumpkin, to \$25 for a truly mammoth one.

This time of year we found a good selection of green beans, summer and winter squash, tomatoes (vine-ripened so they taste like tomatoes), black eyed peas, bell peppers, cucumbers and green chiles.

Other entertainment includes an amazing, mystifying corn maze in the shape of the new Arizona quarter, and pick-your-own giant sunflowers, \$1 stem.

As do many farm visitors, we brought a big cooler and ice packs with us for transporting the vegetables we bought that morning.

Coronado Vineyards

About a 10-minute drive from Apple Annie's, Coronado Vineyards was a convenient brunch stop.

Open just two years, it's the entrepreneurial baby of Jacque and Mark Cook. The young couple bought the old Yucca Sierra Golf Club building along with 40 surrounding acres that now are planted with the characteristically tidy rows of twisty vines.

They imported a chef from North Dakota, employed a French winemaker, and now are serving meals and producing interesting varietals. Among them are a crisp 2007 Riesling, a good all-purpose Syrah, and a sweet Cibola Gold that would be ideal with fruit, nuts and cheese.

The tasting room is like a friendly bar, with high stools and lots of counter space. Tastings are \$3 for a sample of as many as 10 vintages, which is not charged if you purchase additional wine.

The adjacent gift shop sells the winery's products as well as an array of wine-related gifts. At \$8 and \$12 a bottle, it's hard to resist stocking up.

We had brunch in the winery's small, pleasant dining room that overlooks a little gazebo and the Dos Cabezas mountains beyond. On a late Sunday morning, the place was almost full.

One of us chose the Gabby Crabby, consisting of blue crabmeat piled high on an English muffin, with grilled tomatoes and hollandaise.

The Napazona, with grilled turkey, provolone, avocado and jalapeno-infused bacon (it does have a kick) on sourdough was equally appealing. Both came with a tossed side salad.

Although we didn't stay overnight, both Apple Annie and Coronado Vineyards have negotiated a special rate at the new Holiday Inn Express in Willcox. By mentioning either place, the rate instantly drops from \$89.95 to \$79.

Not having been to Willcox for about five years, we were pleasantly surprised to see that it's become a fun, interesting weekend destination. The Rex Allen Museum, filled with memorabilia related to the city's favorite son, and the Chiricahua Museum, a repository of Chiricahua Apache artifacts and area relics, both are worth a browse.

And if you have enough time, make a reservation to see Kartchner Caverns on your way home. They're just north of Benson.

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