

Wine Brings Visitors to Once-Sleepy Cottonwood, Ariz.

DENNIS LENNOX

Arizona's burgeoning wine industry has put the once-sleepy Cottonwood on the map.

Nowhere is that more apparent than the Historic Old Town, an area listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its commercial architecture from the first half of the 20th century. Many of the old storefronts lining Main Street have been repurposed into wine tasting rooms.

Cottonwood, a quick drive from the red rocks of expensive Sedona, is located in the 200-square-mile Verde Valley.

More than 20 vineyards form the Verde Valley Wine Trail appellation—an official American viticultural area (AVA) designation is pending before bureaucrats in the federal government—and grow grapes for commercial wine production. The rest of the wine predominantly comes from

the Willcox AVA, an appellation about 300 miles to the southeast in and around Co-chise County.

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Wines include those made from universally known chardonnay and riesling, but also somewhat lesser-known grapes that just happen to thrive in Arizona's climate. Think Rhône-style blends of grenache, syrah, and mourvèdre; orange wine from malvasia bianca; and the Spanish mainstay tempranillo.



(Above) Vintage signs in historic Old Town Cottonwood.

(Left) Alcantara Vineyards produces 17 different varietals from over 20,000 vines.

It may, however, take some detective work to figure out what is actually in the bottle, as a considerable number of Arizona wines are sold with labels that prioritize a marketing name over the actual grape varietal or varietals used. This is certainly true at Merkin Vineyards with its Tarzan red blend of tempranillo and an undisclosed grape.

Cottonwood's tasting rooms include an outpost of Arizona Stronghold, the state's biggest winemaker. For reds, the 2017 estate-grown syrah from Buhl Memorial Vineyard and 2019 Bayshan, a blend of petite sirah, syrah, and mourvèdre, are highly recommended. Both are serious wines. Drinkers of big, buttery chardonnays should try the 2018 estate-grown chardonnay from Bonita Springs Vineyard.

The 2018 chardonnay from Pillsbury



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The Merkin Vineyards in downtown Cottonwood.



The Southwest Wine Center at Yavapai College is a teaching vineyard and winery for students pursuing a career in the wine industry.

Wine Co. punched well above its weight (only 190 cases were produced). The Co-chise County-based winemaker produces a leaner chardonnay more akin to the kind associated with Chablis in France.

Some of the closest vineyards to downtown's tasting rooms are Alcantara Vineyards and Page Springs Cellars in Cornville, where John McCain lived. A full map and accompanying Verde Valley wine passport can be picked up at the tourist office on Main Street, next to Cottonwood City Hall.

No visit would be complete without a stop at the Southwest Wine Center on the campus of Yavapai College. Not only is it a place for students to learn winemaking and land jobs in the industry, but oenophiles are welcome to visit the 13-acre vineyard and sample wines from the center's own label.



Cottonwood, Ariz., is located about two hours by car from Phoenix.

Dennis Lennox writes a travel column for The Epoch Times.

IF YOU GO

Stay at the Iron Horse Inn, an updated early 1930s motor court motel, with clean and well-appointed rooms. Alternatively, consider The Taven Hotel. Both are located on Main Street.

Eat downtown at Nic's Italian Steak & Crab House or Pizzeria Bocce Patio Bar. Another superb choice is Up the Creek by Page Springs Cellars, where the seriously fine wine list includes around 180 selections.

Verde Adventures offers an approximately two-hour,

self-guided kayak tour of the Verde River that starts and finishes at Alcantara Vineyards, where a tasting is included in the cost (\$109.50 weekdays; \$121 weekends).

Cottonwood is two hours by car from Phoenix, the state's biggest city. Flying in and out of Las Vegas (almost five hours away) is another option, depending on airfare, flight timings, and rental car rates. Best of all, parking in downtown's street spots and parking lots are free, which will surely change as tourist numbers increase.

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