



HEART WOOD CELLARS

finding FORTITUDE

Wednesday, September 2, 2020

Port-style wines gaining traction at Arizona wineries

Georgann Yara Special to Arizona Republic | USA TODAY NETWORK

He's seen the scenario played out dozens of times. But it never gets old for Arizona winemaker Daniel Wood.

Daniel and his wife Valerie run and make the wines for their Verde Valley-based **Heart Wood Cellars**. When pouring their wares at festivals and events, the lineup of tasting options often includes one of their port-style wines.

Whenever someone inquires about the after-dinner sipper, Daniel gives his spiel about how the smaller sample is connected to its higher alcohol content ?19.6% compared to most non-ports that hover around 14% ? and to have water at the ready to balance the inevitable punch.

After tasting, consumers' initial reactions are quizzical, slightly humorous or completely unreadable before they walk away. However, after some time passes or the festival is about to close, the Woods aren't surprised to see some return to buy a bottle or two.

"They're kind of skeptical. But the fact they do come back and buy a bottle

"it feels really good when they do that," Daniel said. "I think they're impressed and surprised."

While relatively new players on the Arizona wine scene, Heart Wood has been making its presence felt with red, white and rosé port-style wines. Their NV Ruby Reserve made with petite sirah and tannat won a silver medal at this year's San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition, as did their white 2017 Diamond Reserve made with viognier and malvasia bianca.

Although the idea of making port-style wines in Arizona may cause some to scratch their heads, the Woods are not outliers. To the contrary, they're part of a recent movement driven by winemakers' desire to give this dessert wine a go.

"Our business plan is to make bold red wines that we like to drink. It's not something we're doing to have fun with. We're doing it because it's what we enjoy," Daniel said.

Award-winning port-style wines from Arizona

The Woods both left Fortune 500 careers to pursue a second calling in the Arizona wine industry. In 2015, they earned degrees in viticulture and enology from the Southwest Wine Center at Yavapai College in Clarkdale. With the intention of crafting their own portstyle wines, they traveled to Portugal and spent time with port winemakers so they could stay as true as they could to authentic traditions and practices.

In 2016, they set out on the journey, making three batches in small 15-gallon vessels.

"So if we messed up, we didn't mess up a lot of it," Valerie said, as she chuckled. "If you screw it up this year, you don't have a chance to change it for another year."

Over the years, they kept aging and tasting their first vintage and the ones that followed. During the fermentation process, ports are fortified with a neutral grape spirit that halts fermentation. Valerie said the biggest challenge was to arrest the fermentation at just the right moment. Trials, calculations and hourly testing helped them determine this sweet spot down to the hour. Which, in their case, was always 3 a.m.

"We probably over-managed it the first time? that's our personality. We didn't want to screw it up," Valerie said.

They submitted both their red and white to the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition but didn't expect anything to come from it. Valerie said they were shocked and delighted with the medals.

"OK, we're on the right track," she said of their thoughts.

Here's what you need to know about port

Like champagne and tequila that can only hail from specific regions, true port can only emerge from vineyards in the Douro Valley in northern Portugal. In fact, only fruit from vineyards that score high

enough on a qualifying scale can be used to produce ports, said Brent Karlicek, beverage director for Upward Projects, the hospitality group that owns Postino, who has visited Porto, Portugal and spent time with port makers.

That's why any fortified wine made outside of the region would best be described as port-style or fortified wine.

Port and port-style wines fall under the broader umbrella of the dessert wine category that includes ice wine, sauternes and late harvest renditions of rieslings or zinfandels.

Karlicek explained there are nine different styles of port ranging from ruby styles, with bold floral fruit and spice, to tawny styles that spend 7-30 years in the barrel oxidizing and developing "beautiful caramel, roasted nut and spice and savory qualities."

For winemakers considering the port route, Karlicek said deciding whether to go ruby or tawny would be the first step.

"Do I want something to drink now to keep in the cellar for decades? Do I want a simple ruby that goes great with pecan pie? Or do I want a tawny I keep for years and open with special friends at a fire and enjoy how great life is?" he said.

Authentic port is made with a neutral grape spirit rather than a grain-based one. This is typically the path followed by winemakers, although some may choose to use the less neutral brandy, which brings color and flavor to the party. Adding the spirit, as the Woods explained, stops the fermentation process and adds an age-defying quality that table wines lack.

"You speak of a wine that can last in barrel or bottle for a very long time and just keep developing complexity," Karlicek said. "It's a really, really special gift."

Why some wineries are 'breaking all the rules'

A year after Daniel and Valerie Wood started making port styles, their former professor embarked on his own port expedition.

Michael Pierce is the director of viticulture and enology at the Southwest Wine Center at Yavapai College. He's also the winemaker for his family's wineries Bodega Pierce and Saeculum Cellars.

Pierce's initial port-style effort was a 2017 vintage that was released in February exclusively to Saeculum wine club members. It was called Omerta, a southern Italian code of silence practiced by the mafia.

But even with his education, expertise and knowledge, Pierce had something to learn. He admitted he was not 100% happy with it, at least right now.

"What I realized is that you need time, a backlog of aging to let the alcohol do its own thing," he said.

He's done a port every year since and plans on letting each one sit for at least five years, allowing the wine and spirit components to unite on the palate instead of existing separately due to the wine's youth.

When it comes to port-style wines, Arizona winemakers are using grape varieties that differ from most of their counterparts in other states, including tempranillo and petite sirah, which thrive here.

A fortified malvasia bianca, another grape that loves the Arizona terroir and weather, has sat in a barrel since it was harvested in 2018. Made in a maderised, or madeira, style, it's been out in the elements at the Southwest Wine Center for the last two years getting hot and cold with the seasons.

"You get a toasted walnut character from the heating and oxidation, and it takes on a whole other character through aging," Pierce said. "We're still trying to figure out how Arizona port wines can taste."

His students are also doing a 2019 barbera in a tawny port style.

One challenge Arizona port makers face is getting the appropriate grape spirits for fortification. Pierce said there aren't many craft distillers licensed for making a grape spirit, so often it's purchased from California. For Pierce, one exception was a trade between the Southwest Wine Center and San Tan Brewery. In exchange for distilling the center's wine for fortification, the Chandler brewery got to keep the barrels for its beer program.

Another hurdle is getting consumers to understand the nuances that differentiate port and port-style wines from mainstream "sweet" wines.

"A lot winemakers are making them and making them with quality. It's about getting them to understand that," Pierce said.

A native Arizonan, Pierce has noticed an increase in local wineries doing more port-styles wines. The growth and longevity of the industry has a lot to do with that.

"Now we're having (a lot of) fruit and able to do unique and exciting things for our customers," he said. "Hopefully, it will get them to try some different things. It should be more of an enticement to try Arizona wines and let it surprise you."

Pierce was surprised when he took his students to visit Dos Cabezas Wine-Works in Sonoita and saw a tumbleweed- esque wine barrel rolling around on the concrete. Then, the winemaker opened it up and pulled out some of its contents for the group to taste.

"What came out of that? I thought, wow, I need to do that," Pierce recalled. "It's everything you're not supposed to do to a wine. It's breaking all the rules, and it's kind of cool to check out."

Making something 'unique to Arizona'

"Yeah, that's kind of it," Dos Cabezas winemaker Todd Bostock confirmed of Pierce's story.

He humbly said it was a device to keep students' attention during the tour.

"I wanted to put it out to share with students. (Like) 'Hey, remember this barrel you walked by that you thought was garbage?'" Bostock said.

The seemingly neglected barrel contained a portion of surplus dessert wine Bostock made back in 2008. He decided to do a rancio-style, similar to the maderised process that Pierce's students are doing with their malvasia bianca, which means the wine is at the mercy of Mother Nature.

"Arizona has this unique climate where the temperature change is huge, so we were trying to take advantage of the climate to do something unique," Bostock said. His southern Arizona winery sits at a

higher elevation and experiences greater fluctuations than the Valley. "We wanted to see what would happen."

And the barrel rolling around the winery? That kept the barrel bung ? or stopper ? at a temperature and position where it wouldn't pop out. Now, Bostock has bungs that don't require as much babysitting.

"After 11 years we're real pros at it. It doesn't roll around like a tumbleweed anymore," he said.

For the first two years, Bostock sampled that wine, and it wasn't great. Then, he started implementing the solera process, fractional blending that incorporates every vintage as the years go by.

Around 2012, things started to get interesting. Hints of the brown sugar, molasses and nuts that Dos Cabezas' Boxcar port-style wine is known for today had begun to appear.

And like Pierce's partnership, Bostock has recently been able to fortify the Boxcar with brandy distilled at San Tan Brewery with Dos Cabezas wine.

Over the years, the wine develops an alcohol level high enough that it creates stability and ageability, losing the sensitivity that table wines have. It's also why port-style and dessert wines can hang around for weeks, even months after opened.

"You're putting sunshine on it, making it durable. It's counterintuitive. To me, it was shocking," Bostock said. "It doesn't taste like you think it would."

As they evolve, Arizona port-style wines have become the result of winemakers taking elements from their peers and styles from around the globe ? some of the older fortified syrahs from Australia are among Bostock's inspirations ? to create something different, Bostock said. Whereas making a dessert wine was once an afterthought or way to use up extra fruit they didn't know what to do with, winemakers are now doing it with intent from the start.

"It's not an attempt to copy port, but steal styles that made sense to us to make something unique to Arizona," Bostock said.

'We want everyone to succeed'

The Woods experienced many good Arizona fortified wines, but none really aligned with their expectation of a true port style. This is where they aimed to differentiate themselves. That and their 500 ml bottle, which is larger than the typical 375 ml ? about two glasses ? format bottle.

Heart Wood's steady port-style lineup has captured attention from their fellow Arizona winemakers, some of who have asked Daniel and Valerie for insight. At least five different wineries have come out with or started to a portstyle since approaching them, they said.

"Those stories are inspiring to us. If someone is doing it you think, I can do it too. We all want to raise the level of wine making in Arizona," Valerie said. "We want everyone to succeed."

Brent Karlicek is the beverage director for Upwards Projects, the hospitality group that owns Postino and other restaurants. UPWARD PROJECTS