

Why you should consider taking classes at the Southwest Wine Center

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The Southwest Wine Center offers students a chance to take a break from the mundane.

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In addition to the classroom component, students get hands-on, real-world experience in the center's 13-acre on-campus vineyard. (Photo: Courtesy Southwest Wine Center)

In 2009, Valerie and Daniel Wood left their corporate life and moved from Tokyo, Japan, to Cornville, Arizona, with the intention of changing their lives.

"We knew we wanted to spend our time in this area, wanted to be outside, wanted to be using our head, using our hands," Valerie Wood said. "But we weren't really sure what it was."

What the married couple discovered was the region's wine industry, which was thriving despite the economic downturn, and the robust selection of classes at the [Southwest Wine Center at Yavapai College](#).

Hands-on, real-world experience

Launched in 2009, the Southwest Wine Center offers a comprehensive curriculum that covers all aspects of the wine industry, including agriculture, business, hospitality and production.

Students can earn certificates in viticulture — either fundamentals or advanced — and enology, as well as an Associate of Applied Science degree in viticulture and enology.

These certificate programs can be combined so students amass knowledge over time, said Michael Pierce, director of viticulture and enology at the Southwest Wine Center.

“The wine industry is not any one thing,” Pierce said. “When students come into the program, they might think, ‘I want to be a winemaker; I want to grow grapes.’

“But the truth is: We’re also tourism. We’re also hospitality. One of our classes is a business class, and they write a business plan.”

By design, the Southwest Wine Center’s programs balance this academic approach with real-world applications.

In addition to the classroom component, students get hands-on, real-world experience in the center’s 13-acre on-campus vineyard, an industry-scale production facility, and a tasting room.



Michael Pierce, Viticulture & Enology Director, Southwest Wine Center *(Photo: Courtesy Southwest Wine Center)*

“It’s a very physical program,” Pierce said. “What really works well for us is our learning labs — and when I say ‘learning labs,’ I mean the vineyard and the winery. They’re going to spend time with the instructor, and then they’re going to apply it in the vineyard.”

A diverse student body

Pierce added that the school draws a diverse student body, which includes people who are switching gears after having success in another line of work and younger students looking to launch their careers.

“Two years ago, I had a 21-year-old first-time college student and an 86-year-old with a Ph.D. in the same classroom,” he said.

The Southwest Wine Center’s status as a sustainability leader in the Arizona wine industry is also appealing to some enrollees.

“The Wine Center itself is designed with a number of low-impact practices, including energy efficiency and reuse of water,” Pierce said. “We’re actually growing up on a water source that would have been broadcast out to saturate back into the groundwater.”

These sustainability initiatives recently led to the center winning the Award of Distinction at the Arizona Forward 39th Annual Environmental Excellence Awards, he added.

Leaving the office and embracing entrepreneurship

The Southwest Wine Center program also appeals to those with a penchant for entrepreneurship.

Pierce noted that graduates are prepared to run small boutique wineries or launch tourism-focused companies to capitalize on the area’s wineries.

“It’s a break from the mundane,” Pierce said of the unconventional paths that graduates embark on. “It’s: ‘Let’s jump off and try this.’ It’s something exciting: ‘I can work with the earth; I can create something; I can market something; I can be an entrepreneur.’ It’s that drive that makes them want to take the leap.”

The Woods certainly caught the entrepreneurship bug thanks to the Southwest Wine Center.

While taking classes, the couple pitched in wherever help was needed, including planting vines on the center’s acreage and working in the newly opened tasting room.

However, a business plan that the pair put together just before graduating piqued their interest in launching a business of their own.

Today, the couple runs the boutique winery Heart Wood Cellars, which focuses on what Valerie Wood describes as “bold” and “elegant” aged red wines.

In 2018, the winery earned first-place and bronze awards in The Arizona Republic’s Arizona Wine Competition.



Southwest Wine Center at Yavapai College (Photo: Courtesy Southwest Wine Center)

“It’s much better than going into an office,” Valerie Wood said of her Heart Wood Cellars work. “When we’re standing up in the vineyards, looking out over the valley, we jokingly say: ‘I love my office view.’”

Making wine education accessible to all

To ease the financial burden on students, the Southwest Wine Center offers several [scholarships](#) of varying amounts, each with its own set of requirements.

These are available year-round, as the school calendar follows the growing season, which is often different than other colleges’ schedules.

“We have multiple scholarships that are not based on financial need, which means everybody qualifies,” Pierce said, noting that “multiple scholarship funds” have been funded by graduates. “They went through the program, and they see the value in this program to an extent that they wanted to support others going through it.”

These scholarships include one funded by the Woods, he added.

Above all, the emotional connections facilitated by the Southwest Wine Center reverberate beyond the lives of students, graduates and instructors into the region itself.

“When they work in the vineyard together, they work in the winery together, they become one of us, and we’re all here to support one another, whether that’s an instructor to students or graduates to students,” Pierce said.

“(The program) really opens up a lot of possibilities for our graduates,” he continued. “Whatever speaks to you, you can create your own pathway to develop that skill set to make those connections through this program.”

Interested in taking a break from the office and your computer, and instead starting to work outdoors in nature? Learn more about the educational programs at the Southwest Wine Center at Yavapai College, which prepare graduates for a variety of careers in viticulture and enology. For more information, visit southwestwinecenter.com.

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