



Photo By: Tim Fuller

# DRINKING IN THE VERDE VALLEY

**How the hills and deserts of central Arizona gave birth to some of the boldest wines in America.**

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When Californians Valerie and Daniel Wood purchased a second home in Arizona's Verde River Valley in the early aughts, they were surprised by the quality of the wines they found. Many of them were comparable to the ones they drank back home; they also compared favorably with the Grenaches, Syrahs, and Cabernets they'd enjoyed in the southern wine-growing regions of Italy, France, and Spain.

"But what intrigued us the most was the idea of wine grapes growing in the desert," Valerie says. "So, we spent some time talking to people about them." They learned that the Verde Valley has many similarities, both in elevation and climate, to more celebrated wine regions, including—yes—the south of France, Italy, and Spain. "Those growing regions are around 30 to 50 degrees latitude," Valerie says. "Here, it's 34 degrees. As for the extreme heat of the Grand Canyon State, it's not as big a problem as it seems. "The elevation affords us a cooling off period during the evening," she says. "It gives grapes time to rest and prepare for the next day of sun and heat." She also says the terroir, which ranges sporadically from limestone rich soil to desert sand, also produces bold wines with fascinating, and at times unique, profiles.

When they bought the house in Arizona, the Woods were working high-power corporate jobs at McDonald's. But, over time, they became so intrigued by the idea of making wine in Arizona that they quit their jobs, moved to Clarkdale full time, and enrolled at the Southwest Wine Center, which offers certificate programs in viticulture and enology. After receiving their certifications, they quickly established a label of their own, Heart Wood Cellars, which will mark its first two releases--a 2016 oak-barrel-aged vintage Syrah and a Cabernet Franc--this spring.

## Heart Wood® Cellars

Opening a winery is an expensive proposition. Not only do you have to lay down the money to secure land, there's also equipment, labor, and marketing--items that can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Luckily, the Woods received help from an unlikely source: an aspiring local winemaker named Maynard James Keenan, who just happened to be the lead singer of the alternative rock bands Tool and Perfect Circle. Keenan moved to nearby Jerome in the mid-1990s and started a vineyard that now provides for his two labels: Caduceus Cellars and Merkin Vineyard (both have received plenty of accolades from wine enthusiast drinkers and wine writers nationwide). In fact, it was Keenan who helped the Wine Center, which is a branch of Yavapai College (a community college with six locations), start the vineyard where the Woods learned to grow wine grapes in the first place.

Although Spanish monks produced the first Arizona wines in the 16th century for sacrament, the state's commercial wine industry truly started to take off only during the past decade. And though there are excellent vineyards and tasting rooms in Sonoita and Willcox to the south, it's the Verde Valley, about 100 miles north of Phoenix, to which wine enthusiasts are flocking.



Here the wines come in many forms, from juicy Cabernet Francs to earthy, spicy Zinfandels. "The reason our wines are special is because of our climate and the fact that our rocky soil contains a lot of lime," says Jodie Filardo, community and economic director for Clarkdale. "After all, lousy soil makes for great grape growing." What also makes for great growing is well-educated grape growers, which is why Southwest Wine Center is such a key component of the wine region. "Students learn to plant their own vineyards, irrigate, and cull-the-fruit pest control. You name it, they learn it," she says. And once the students have started producing wine, they often start marketing and selling it, usually, like the Woods, right in Clarkdale.

## Heart Wood® Cellars

Many of the region's wine makers get their big break serving and marketing their wines at Four Eight Wineworks, a cooperative incubator/tasting room run by Keenan that offers up-and-coming producers, who don't have the money for such extravagances, to bring their vino to market. Aside from the tasting room (one of around eight in Clarkdale) that offers labels such as Iniquus Cellars, Saeculum Cellars, and Keenan's own brands, visitors can drink in the history of its location, a historic Bank of Arizona building featuring its original teller stations, repurposed railroad-tie furniture, and a bank vault retail station. And the best time to visit is the weekend of May 12, 2018, when Four Eight will host to the annual Verde Valley Wine Festival. Not only are the plane tickets cheaper than they are to the south of Italy, but you'll find the wines are just as captivating.

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