

Water, wine — Arizona?

Believe it: You can kayak to a winery in the northern part of state

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RANDALL WEISSMAN
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COTTONWOOD, Ariz. — Wine, kayaking, Arizona. The initial concept seemed to be something of an oxymoron.

The parched landscape surrounding the Phoenix airport added to the impression that this was far from the usual wine-growing area. And the drive north on Interstate Highway 17 only reinforced that.

Dust clouds swirled around the car as I bumped down Grapevine Way toward Alcantara Vineyards in Verde Valley. I knew I was far from the lush vineyards of Burgundy.

As I pulled into the parking lot, the still-dormant vines stretched toward the horizon. And I could see no waterway for the kayaking portion of the tour.

After we looked around the tasting area and the winery grounds for about 15 minutes, our guide from Sedona Adventure

Tours arrived, and five of us piled into his van to head for the Verde River for our Water to Wine tour.

Our inflatable kayaks waited on the bank. After a short lesson, we all strapped into our life jackets and pushed into the river. Our guide told us not to worry if we got stuck on some rocks. The river is barely 3 feet deep where we were going. The trip turned out to be a pleasant, hourlong float, rather than something a veteran kayaker might enjoy, but it whet everyone's palate for the waiting wine tasting.

We glided to the bank at the base of a hill that led us back to the Alcantara tasting room. At \$129, it wasn't cheap, but \$20 of that was a credit to be used at the tasting.

In the cool tasting room, Alcantara's wines had clean, focused flavors. The viognier was especially crisp and refreshing, and the mourvedre was overflowing with lush fruitiness. I began to think this trip was going to be a very pleasant surprise.

From Alcantara, it was on to Cottonwood, which is the center of the Verde Valley Wine Trail in northern Arizona. Old Town Cottonwood is about two blocks long, and there are five wine tasting rooms, each with its own ambience and wine. These are fun tasting rooms, more concerned with patrons' enjoying the wines than with impressing Robert Parker.

Don't miss the Pillsbury Wine Company and the Arizona Stronghold Vineyards. Pillsbury's tasting room is a favorite with both tourists and locals. On my visit, I shared wine and comments about it with a local couple and their very large mastiff. Pillsbury's chardonnay was lively with hints of mineral to give it structure. The Diva red blend was full-flavored and fruity.

Arizona Stronghold is the largest winemaker in the state. Its Bonita Springs cabernet is well worth sampling if you can find it. It has an excellent structure with

a beautiful cedar nose.

The Wine Trail also includes three wineries in the hills outside of town: Oak Creek Vineyards, Javelina Leap Vineyard and Winery and Page Springs Cellars. Page Springs is an especially lovely setting and produces several fine examples of syrah, petite sirah and mourvedre. It also served the nicest malvasia I'd tasted since I was in Croatia.

The increasing quality of Arizona wines is obvious to anyone who tastes them, but it also means a growing role for them at fine dining establishments in the state.

The best example is at Kai, the five-star restaurant at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass resort outside Phoenix, where Pillsbury wines will take center stage at the resort's food and wine dinner series. Kai's chef, Michael O'Dowd, fuses local ingredients with sophisticated techniques to produce complex, full-flavored dishes that demand equally com-

plex wines. Pairing Pillsbury wines with O'Dowd's buffalo tenderloin, smoked corn puree, merguez sausage and cholla buds would be a culinary treat.

Another opportunity for sampling Arizona's wines without going to Cottonwood is the annual Hollywood & Wine Festival at the Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix. Pillsbury, Page Springs and Arizona Stronghold are regulars at the festival, which runs throughout the summer (arizona.biltmore.com).

The wine industry in Arizona is relatively young, but it offers

consumers a chance to visit wineries while they are still developing. The winemakers know their terroir and their grapes. They may never produce the next Screaming Eagle cabernet, but don't be surprised if they start producing world-class competitors to Chateaufeuf du Pape in a few years.

ctc-travel@tribune.com

Favorites

Here are some of my favorite Arizona wineries and tasting rooms.

Page Springs Cellars: 1500 N. Page Springs Road, Cornville. Cost: \$10. 928-639-3004, pagespringscellars.com

Alcantara Vineyards: 3445 S. Grapevine Way, Verde Valley. Cost: \$10. 928-649-8463, alcantaravineyard.com

Arizona Stronghold Vineyards Tasting Room: 1023 Main St., Cottonwood. Cost: \$9. 928-639-2789, azstronghold.com

Pillsbury Wine Company Vineyards Tasting Room: 1012 Main St., Cottonwood. Cost: \$12. 928-639-0646, pillsburywine.com

If you go

The Classic Water to Wine tour is \$129; sedonaadventuretours.com. Visitors need a car to reach the wine country, and they should plan to spend at least one night in Cottonwood. Walking among the vineyards and sampling all the wines are not conducive to driving back to Phoenix unless you have a designated driver.

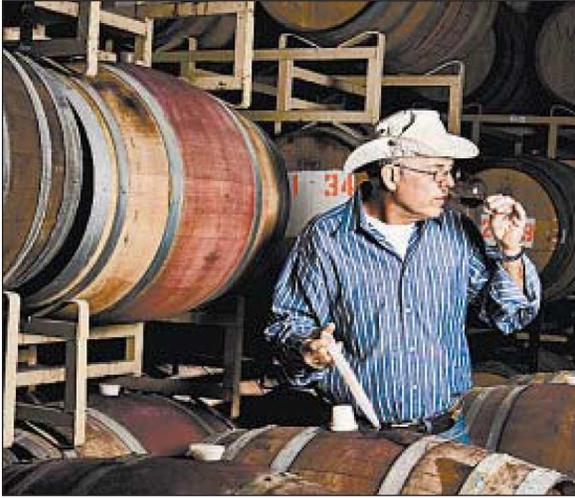
Where to stay: Best Western Cottonwood Inn is a good value. A room with two queen beds starts at \$89.99 per night including breakfast; 928-634-5575.

The Tavern Hotel is in the heart of Old Cottonwood. Originally built as a grocery, it was completely redone and turned into a boutique hotel in 2011. The front desk is in the nearby Tavern Grille. Rooms start at \$149 per night, including breakfast at one of two local eateries; 928-639-1669, thetavernhotel.com

Where to eat: Rendezvous In Old Town is a great place for a light meal. The sandwiches are excellent, and there is a superb selection of craft beers. Although there are more than 20 wines on the list, only one is from Arizona. 928-634-3777, riotcottonwood.com.

The Tavern Grille has a very broad menu, including salads, sandwiches, prime rib and seared ahi tuna. 928-634-6669, taverngrille.net





Vintner Sam Pillsbury checks out the product at his winery in Cottonwood, Ariz., the center of the Verde Valley Wine Trail.



Kayakers on the Water to Wine tour paddle around the final bend of the placid Verde River on their return to the Alcantara Vineyards tasting room.