

5 Epic Wine Adventures for the Fall

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Harvest season is underway in Arizona wine country. Explore it in exquisite detail with these oenological outings.

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Original photography by Paul Gill & Kevin Kaminski

WINE ADVENTURE #1

Sip and Stay at New Hotels and Guest Rooms

Fans of Arizona wine have long lamented the lack of high-end hotel and hospitality options in the state's most illustrious growing regions, which are, after all, farm communities: Willcox, Sonoita, Cornville. Sure, you could always book a room at the Hotel Valley Ho and walk the Scottsdale Wine Trail, or stay in one of Old Town Cottonwood's famously haunted hotels while touring Main Street tasting rooms, but there's no substitute for an estate winery when it comes to sensual immersion. Tasting the vino where it's grown. Seeing the vines. Breathing in the musty aromas of the barrel room.

Fortunately, a new wave of overnight options is cresting over Arizona wine country. Visit one this fall and leave the driving for the morning.



Tirrito Farm pond path and glamping domes. Photo by Kevin Kaminski. Model Kelly Kaminski. Wardrobe styling by Madison Rutherford.

Tirrito Farm in Willcox

Nearby wineries: *Pillsbury Wine Co., Sand-Reckoner, Zarpara Vineyard, Bodega Pierce, Birds and Barrels Vineyards, Carlson Creek Vineyard*

Tirrito Farm landed in Willcox wine country with a mighty splash when it opened in 2022. It had a brewery. It had a winery. It was a working dairy farm that churned out a variety of compelling cheeses. Truly, there was nothing else quite like it in Arizona. But something was missing for owner Sal Tirrito and his craft-inclined wife, Yuri. “We quickly noticed that, while people loved visiting, they really did not want to drive home,” says the Tucson cardiologist. “This realization was the catalyst for our venture into the lodging business.” Last spring, the couple unveiled their latest addition to the Tirrito Farm amenity suite – six multi-colored glamping domes, each of which sleeps two to four people, each with a distinct theme (e.g. the hot-pink “Barbie Glamp”). Dramatically framed against the Chiricahua Mountains on a sun-beaten high-desert plain, the domes are a stylish and offbeat solution for any wine-loving visitor who wants to spend the day knocking down flights on the famed Willcox Bench, followed by a sunset, solitude and perhaps dinner at the Tirrito Farm Kitchen, which serves brick-oven pizzas, grilled chops and creative canapés out of the sprawling, earth-enclosed main house and winery. In other words: Perish the thought of driving home. “We really aimed to introduce something fresh and unprecedented to the area,” Tirrito says. “It’s truly astounding to see how much the place has evolved.”



Tirrito

Farm glamping dome interior

Los Milics Vineyards Casitas in Elgin

Nearby wineries: *Los Milics Vineyards, Rune Vineyards, Hannah's Hill Vineyard*

It's been a long, arduous journey through the dark heart of bureaucratic permitting and transient lodging laws, but light is finally breaking for Pavle Milic and his long-awaited guest-casita program at Los Milics Vineyards in Elgin. "Many stories for another time," he says exhaustedly when pressed for details. In August, the winemaker and *PHOENIX* magazine columnist began taking reservations for the one-bedroom, stand-alone "small houses" at his groundbreaking winery in the Mustang Mountain foothills, each with private deck patios affording big, cinematic eyefuls of the vineyard and sugarloaf hillsides beyond. Recently named the No. 2 tasting room in the U.S. by a *USA Today* readers' poll, the winery – and its unkenneled casitas – will finally give Elgin-Sonoita the sip-and-stay option it has historically lacked.



Los Milics Vineyards

Taawaki Inn in Clarkdale

Nearby wineries: *Southwest Wine Center, Merkin Vineyards Hilltop Winery & Trattoria*
Equidistant from Tuzigoot National Monument, Yavapai College's Southwest Wine Center and Maynard James Keenan's new Merkin Vineyards Hilltop Winery & Trattoria, this just-opened Hopi Nation hotel offers much in the way of wine-country convenience. With its signature stained-glass Sun Kachina window, Valley interior designer Hank Arens's radiant

lobby plan sets the mood for a day on the trail, be it in Jerome or Cottonwood. Taawaki Inn's 44 rooms also offer quick access to the Chateau Tumbleweed and Bodega Pearce tasting rooms along with the funky, small-town delights of Clarkdale, home of the Copper Art Museum, Verde Canyon Railroad and Smelter Town Brewery.



Taawaki Inn

WINE ADVENTURE #2

Ride Free on Arizona's Most Gorgeous Wine Drive

The Patagonia-Sonoita Scenic Road is lined with majestic vistas, a trip worthy of merit all its own. But every pilgrimage needs a *raison d'être*. In this case, it's Queen of Cups winery. Tucked around a corner and down an alley in Patagonia in southeastern Arizona, Queen of Cups is a treasure to be unearthed, a reward for a long day's expedition.

They say it's the journey that matters most, not the destination. We say: Why not both?



Patagonia Lake State Park. Photo by Paul Gill

The Drive

Take I-10 from Phoenix to Tucson, continuing south past the city. It'll be fast and boring highway driving, but think of it as an amuse-bouche cleansing the palate for all the rich sights ahead.

Exit I-10 at Vail to go south on AZ-83. The gentle curves of the 83 keep speeds slow so travelers can soak up the scenery: the statuesque peak of Mt. Wrightson, the Santa Rita Mountains rife with lush canyons and oak-pine forests, grasslands rolling down from the foothills.

The drive then bobs and weaves over pastoral hills on its way to Sonoita. Here, you come to the juncture for AZ-82. On any other day, you might veer east to visit Arizona wine mainstays like **Rune Wines** (3969 AZ-82,

Sonoita, 520-338-8823, runewines.com) and **Los Milics Vineyards** (423 Upper Elgin Rd., Elgin, 520-221-0180, losmilicsvineyards.com). But today you're taking the road less traveled. Ease eastward on AZ-82 toward Patagonia.

AZ-82 forms the Patagonia-Sonoita Scenic Road, a designation well earned. The highway seems to hug the landscape's every contour. It traces Sonoita Creek, which threads back and forth like a tightly stitched hem. It nestles up to the steep rise of canyon walls from Adobe and Casa Blanca canyons. It stretches out over the sprawl of ranches and ducks into the wooded shade of the Borderlands Wildlife Preserve.

Just when you think the leafy canopy couldn't get any denser, the tree line breaks to reveal Patagonia, a welcoming hamlet of brightly painted homes, patio-clad cafés, bustling shops and one very special, very secret winery.



Photo courtesy Queen of Cups

The Destination

Behind Patagonia's main drag and through a narrow alley, a small entrance in a brick wall opens like a portal to another world. It's here that **Queen of Cups** holds court. A faded sandwich-board sign propped on the sidewalk indicates the way.

The delightfully hard-to-find location is part of the wild charm of the winery and tasting room. Inside, cowboy-hat lamps illuminate the bar, local art adorns the walls, plants hang from rafters and a disco ball glitters. The vibe can be gregarious and boisterous, or moody and subdued.

"We love our little back alley," says Lily Christopher, who with her partner and winemaker, Emmett Rahn-Oakes, co-owns Queen of Cups.

The origin story of Queen of Cups owes much to this alley. Christopher, an environmentalist, and Rahn-Oakes, whose winemaking career took him to France, Spain and Argentina, and to Arizona's Rune and Pillsbury wineries, had always dreamed of opening a winery. Just not *right now*. "It was, 'Maybe someday, maybe down the road,'" Christopher recalls.

Then in 2020, this hole-in-the-alleyway space became available, and in Patagonia no less, where the couple first met and now live. "We were inspired by the idea of being a village

winery in Patagonia,” Christopher says. “A place where locals can drop in to say hi, where we have community buy-in.”

So the couple, along with friends and business partners Kayla Lewis and Bo Simpson, jumped at the opportunity. The foursome launched Queen of Cups in 2022. “There’s always an edge of chaos because we’re doing things in a way that’s frankly a little scrappy,” Rahn-Oakes explains.

Scrappy maybe, but also skilled – especially when it comes to the wine. Queen of Cups sources grapes from vineyards in Arizona and Mexico, and winemaker Rahn-Oakes leans into an old-school approach to the craft, using a basket press to extract juice and employing a low-intervention style of winemaking that reflects minimal use of additives and manipulation.

The result: Bright, fresh, balanced expressions of Picpoul Blanc, Viognier, Malbec and Barbera.

Try a flight or go all in on a bottle. Order one of the nosh plates, too, perhaps a smashed pea dip with orange marmalade and capers. No matter what you do, settle in and savor the moment. After all, you earned it.

WINE ADVENTURE #3

Stay Local on the Scottsdale Wine Trail

If you’d prefer a wine adventure a little closer to home – somewhere you can Uber, say – may we suggest the Scottsdale Wine Trail? Old Town boasts a constellation of eight tasting rooms, wine bars and bottle shops where you can sip to your heart’s content and then sleep it off in your own bed. Plus, there’s a nifty passport (\$5) that provides discounts at participating wineries. scottsdalewinetrail.com

LDV Winery

Winemaking is only the tip of the iceberg for Curt Dunham and Peggy Fiandaca. In addition to offering tastings (three wines for \$15, four for \$20), the owners of LDV Winery in Pearce host regular events including Le Nez du Vin (Aromatherapy for Wine Lovers), wine pairing classes (charcuterie, chocolate or cheese), and even European wine cruises along the Danube, Rhine and Rhône rivers. Our recs: any of the Petite Sirahs or the Sky Island Viognier. 7134 E. Stetson Dr., 480-664-4822, ldvwinery.com



Photo courtesy LDV Winery

Salvatore Vineyards

Italian roots run deep at Salvatore, named for winemaker Jason Domanico's grandfather and created to honor his Sicilian and Calabrian heritage. The Domanico family of wines also includes Passion Cellars and Cabal Cellars, with tasting rooms in Bisbee, Jerome, Elgin, Willcox, Tombstone and, of course, Scottsdale. Our picks: Salvatore's *molto Italiano* Sangiovese or Graciano. Tastings vary by label and availability. 7064 E. Fifth Ave., 480-423-2901, passioncellars.com/scottsdale

Arizona Stronghold Vineyards

A relative old-timer in the Arizona wine scene, Arizona Stronghold was established in 2007 and boasts a tasting room in Cottonwood, a vineyard in southeastern Arizona and a sister label, Provisioner, as well as its Scottsdale lounge. Its name is a nod to local Indigenous history: Cochise Stronghold was the refuge of the great Apache chief Cochise. Try the Nachise, a GSM blend with Petite Sirah thrown in. Tastings include six wines for \$17-\$20. 4225 N. Marshall Way, 480-779-1600, azstronghold.com

Los Milics Vineyards

The new kid on the block is already making a splash: Los Milics' Sandra's rosé won our Best of the Valley taste-test of eight Arizona rosés by pastry chef and wine judge Tracy Dempsey. Owner and winemaker Pavle Milic opened this sleek tasting room this spring to complement the tasting room and casitas at his Elgin winery. A tasting flight includes five pours for \$25. Save room for dessert – a rich chocolate ganache brownie or delicate pink Champagne cupcake. 4151 N. Marshall Way, 480-390-1668, losmilicsvineyards.com

Carlson Creek

Belly up to the 20-foot copper bar at the Valley outpost of this family-owned Willcox winery, where \$18 tastings include your choice of five wines. Be sure to try the Rule of Three, the Carlson brothers' flagship GSM (Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre) blend. Carlson Creek also has the coolest merch for Arizona wine lovers: super soft T-shirts, tanks and hoodies emblazoned with the Arizona flag rendered in colorful graphics of wine bottles. 4142 N. Marshall Way, 480-947-0636, carlsoncreek.com



Carlson Creek. Photo courtesy Experience Scottsdale

The Wine Collective of Scottsdale

Zoya Vora-Shah does things a little differently than most wine bar owners. In addition to traditional tastings (four wines, starting at \$18), she offers blind tastings and a sommelier-led Sensory Wine Tasting Experience (starting at \$200 for two) where guests can enjoy small food pairings and feel the different soils from Arizona's AVAs (American Viticultural Area). Vora-Shah also stocks quirkier small-batch vintages and a nice selection of natural wines. 4020 N. Scottsdale Rd., 480-912-1746, the-wine-collective.com

Aridus Winery & Vineyards

Natural and reclaimed materials make this tasting room feel like you're at the Willcox winery sipping with owners Scott and Joan Dahmer. The couple brought on a new winemaker, Jef Stebben, this July, so visitors can look forward to his vintages in a few years' time. Until then, sip a citrusy and floral yet dry Malvasia Bianca or a Cabernet Franc with notes of cranberry and orange. Tastings run \$15-\$25 and include four wines. 7173 E. Main St., 520-954-2676, ariduswineco.com

Wine Girl

"This one's for the girls," to quote Martina McBride. Amy and Trevor Johnston take an unabashedly femme approach in their two wine bars (the Scottsdale iteration and their Napa Valley original), trading the typical leather for plush pink booths and white couches. The husband-and-wife team favor California wines on their bright and bubbly menu, but more Arizona vintages may be offered in the future. Flights start at \$23 and include four pours. Also fun: "winetails," aka wine-based cocktails. 4025 N. Scottsdale Rd., 480-686-9077, winegirl.com



Photo courtesy Wine Girl

WINE ADVENTURE #4

Scout the State's Hottest Young Talent at Southwest Wine Center.

“Our tasting room used to be the best-kept secret,” says Southwest Wine Center chief Michael Pierce. “But word has got out that it’s beautiful here and the wines are great, so now we request reservations to make sure you have a seat.”

In the heart of the Verde Valley AVA (American Viticultural Area), a quiet evolution has been brewing – or rather, fermenting. Established in 2009, the Southwest Wine Center at Yavapai College’s Clarkdale campus has played a pivotal role in the state’s wine industry by training a new generation of talented winemakers.

The best part: You can drink their exams.



Southwest Wine Center program head Michael Pierce

Offering wine enthusiasts and aspiring vintners a two-year associate of applied science degree in viticulture and enology, the curriculum covers everything from wine business management to grape cultivation. Pierce explains the dual purpose of the program: “It’s one, economic development, and two, workforce development. We’re preparing students to start their own business or find work in the industry. The average age is 49, and I think that’s important in this context because they’re adults who are either in the middle of their career or looking to retool and start their own business.”

It’s an opportunity that resonates with student Jeremiah Prough, a former casino poker dealer who enrolled to turn a hobby into a career. “As a passionate winemaker, it has given me more insight and confidence in the industry,” says Prough, who has a part-time position tending the school’s vineyard. “I’m aiming to refine my winemaking skills and continuing to contribute to the growth of the Verde Valley AVA and the Arizona wine industry.”

As part of its mission, the program operates a 13-acre estate vineyard that serves as a living laboratory where students tend lesser-known varietals that thrive in the high desert, such as Malvasia Bianca, Picpoul Blanc, Aglianico and Tannat, while its production facility hones their winemaking techniques. The fruits of their labor? A lineup of collaborative student-crafted wines sold under the Southwest Wine Center label and poured in the center’s tasting room.

“When we harvest grapes, sort, de-stem and finally inoculate, there’s a real sense of joy when we see the bottles filled and labeled with the wine we’ve made,” Prough says.



Photos courtesy Southwest Wine Center

Open Thursday through Sunday, the tasting room is staffed by students and graduates who are as passionate about sharing their knowledge as they are about their one-of-a-kind releases. Due to their small-barrel production methods, the offerings change frequently – last year alone, the school poured 27 different wines. Visitors can sample a flight of five of these unique student-crafted vintages, either in the intimate interior lined with barrel staves or on the picturesque patio overlooking a vineyard block of Negroamaro grapevines. “The wines are really unique because we work with small batches, sometimes just one or two barrels, and the selection changes quite a bit,” Pierce says. “For example, we had a great frizzante Vinho Verde this summer that was sparkling and refreshing. It sold like crazy and we plan on making more with this year’s harvest.”

Many of SWC’s estimated 157 graduates have gone on to work in tourism and hospitality – and an elite handful have started their own wineries.

One alum, Emil Molin, launched Cove Mesa Vineyard after obtaining his degree in 2017. A former lawyer and avid wine collector, he found the program to be a transformative experience. “While I’ve always dreamed of owning a vineyard, I never imagined making wine,” he says. “But the oenology program and Michael – he’s spectacular; one of the best teachers I’ve ever had, even going through law school – got me excited.” This year, Molin won 11 medals at the prestigious azcentral Arizona Wine Competition, including three Best in Class awards for Cove Mesa’s Tempranillo Rosé, Petite Sirah and Trebbiano.

Other notable alumni winemakers include Brooke Lowry Ide of Vino Stache Winery, Tom Messier of Omphalos Winery and Jules Dixon of 1764 Vineyards, whose 2021 8 Years Later red blend won the coveted Governor’s Cup at the 2024 azcentral Arizona Wine and a Double Gold medal at the 2024 *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition.

“Our students are on an adventure,” Pierce says. “When people come to the tasting room, they’re tasting great wine while the students share their backstory and what made them want to transition. Visitors have a chance to join them on that adventure, and they love hearing the story.”

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Vineyard in the fall



SWC alumni and winemakers Valerie and Daniel Wood at graduation

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WINE ADVENTURE #5

Experience a Culinary Awakening in Cottonwood

Imagine a James Bond-style supervillain... who moonlights as a winemaker.

It’s a notion you might not be able to shake after laying eyes on ***Merkin Vineyards Hilltop Winery & Trattoria*** in Old Town Cottonwood. Planted on a flat-top mesa just steps from

Main Street, it's more like a compound than a winery, combining a restaurant, tasting room, greenhouse and production facility into one truly impressive manifestation of vision and purpose. The views are lordly. There's even a tram that takes visitors to the top from the street below.



Merkin Vineyards Hilltop Winery & Trattoria

Strikingly, the hill is encircled by rows of terraced grape vines. How easy it would be for owner and vigneron Maynard James Keenan to lace them with concertina wire, or mount automated machine guns on the trellises, as a bulwark against invading MI6 agents. World domination demands these things.

More likely, Keenan's ambitions are humbler – like possibly turning Cottonwood into the premier wining and dining destination in Arizona. Coupled with the recent opening of fellow winemaker Sam Pillsbury's food-focused tasting room down the street, that vision might already be fact.

Old Town Cottonwood has long been known to Arizona wine fans. The historical Main Street area played host to the state's earliest and most densely packed trail of tasting rooms. And the food? Led by local favorites such as Pizzeria Bocce, Crema Craft Kitchen + Bar and Keenan's own Merkin Osteria, it's always been good. Good, but maybe not destination-good.

The new Merkin Trattoria, with its 270-degree views of the Verde Valley, changes that. Sourced from the four greenhouses Keenan operates in Arizona, the La Verdura vegetable

platter from the trattoria's antipasti menu offers the most dazzling cast of dirt-treats I've ever eaten. Tangy, pickled sheets of sliced cabbage. Tiny, intensely flavored heirloom tomatoes. A roasted gourd so meaty and mild, I mistook it for a giant mushroom. It just goes on and on. I'm no vegetarian. I demand animal proteins at every meal. But good is good.

The Florentine-inspired menu also includes wood-fired pizza, several next-level-looking pasta dishes and a selection of lasagna "cupcakes" – baseball-size morsels of duck-egg pasta folded around, for example, roasted chicken, poblano peppers, béchamel, ricotta, mozzarella and pecorino. Rich, toasty and delicious.



fare at Merkin Vineyards

Evidently, the menu in the tasting room, a dissected shipping container welded into the compound's super structure, is even more rarefied. While sipping select vintages from Keenan's two wine labels – Merkin Vineyards and Caduceus Cellars – guests can also dine on Southwestern small bites devised by James Beard-nominated chef Noriyuki "Nori" Sugie of Charlie Trotter's fame. On its face, that sounds like one of the state's great bucket-list food experiences.



Pillsbury Wine Co. tasting room. Photo by Mirelle Inglefield

One of the first winemakers to plant a flag in Cottonwood was Pillsbury, who ran a popular tasting room for many years on Main Street. Two years ago, he decamped a half-mile south, moving Pillsbury Wine Co. to a 1930s historical home on a large, shaded, tucked-away lot. Rechristened the Pillsbury Pairing House, the space is much roomier than the old place, with lounge-y spots indoors and out, and a more innovative culinary mission.

In addition to always-available charcuterie and cheese boards, chef Abby Rothwell offers a dynamic, monthly menu of four entrées and one dessert, all seasonally driven, with a heavy emphasis on local sourcing. I can testify to this personally, because during my most recent visit a young mother arrives at the tasting room with her rosy-cheeked 6-month-old baby in one arm, and a box of beautiful, freshly foraged lobster mushrooms in the other, lifted from the Coconino National Forest near Flagstaff.

“This is the time to get them, after a nice monsoon,” the mushroom hunter says. “They’re everywhere up there.”

In short order, those lobster mushrooms will find their way to Rothwell’s Dirty Verde Veggie Parm Sandwich or one of the other inventive dishes on the menu. Sipping through a six-shooter tasting flight of Pillsbury wines, crowned with a pour of his explosive flagship Guns & Kisses Shiraz, I make hasty work of Sam’s Lamb Gyro, the chef’s salute to the winemaker’s upbringing in lamb-centric New Zealand, punctuated with a large fan of luscious butter lettuce and house-made tzatziki.

Truly, special things are happening in Cottonwood. The wine is the same as it ever was – and the food is catching up.

