

Blood from Stones

The road to Page Springs Cellars near Sedona in northern Arizona dips and rolls over the highland desert terrain, a stony, creosote-dotted landscape of great bones and little flesh. In the parking lot, cars tuck beneath solar panels, sheltering from the sun. *Blood from stone*, I think. My next meeting is with either a madman or a magician.

From Barossa to Burgundy, I've met accountant winemakers and scientist winemakers and bon vivant winemakers. But Sedona, I would soon discover, attracts puzzler winemakers who celebrate scarcity and what they can juice from it, outsiders who pride themselves on the rash burns they are regularly subject to in brush-offs by industry alphas in California.

"Have you had Malbec from Argentina?" one of these radicals, the combative Maynard James Kennan of Caduceus Cellars, who also happens to be the lead singer of the heavy metal band Tool, asked me previously over the phone, throwing down the gauntlet. "We have the same elevation, same weather patterns, same rainfall. But we have no marketing plan."

Sedona, gateway to Arizona's red rock country 90 minutes' drive north of Phoenix, has plenty of market cred among hikers eager to scale its striated buttes and new age pilgrims seeking the fabled vortexes – or energy centers -- said to be squired in the rocks. Perhaps the winemakers here believe in that magic too. In the past decade, the number of Arizona wineries has shot from a dozen or so to over 100. Many are in sleepy Willcox, 200 miles south of Phoenix and named an American Viticultural Area in 2016. In the north near Sedona, 20 wineries and tasting rooms have clustered in the Verde Valley, where the vines are stressed by rocky soils and altitudes above 3,200 feet moderate temperatures from sundown chill to midday blaze.

I've come to the valley's close-set towns of Jerome, Clarkdale, Cottonwood and Cornville a skeptic, expecting the tart pinot gris and shapeless cab francs associated with hot climates where grapes mature fast and flabby. To determine their character, I've lined up two days of tastings with the characters behind them.

"The whole country is still recovering from Prohibition," the first, Eric Glomski, founder of Page Springs Cellars, tells me over a crisp 2012 malvasia bianca under a pergola at the end of that unpromising road. "Arizona had the first wine planted since the missionaries came through."

He refers to the 16th century when the earliest Franciscan friar, Marcos de Niza, blazed a trail for future brothers seeking to convert the Native Americans to Catholicism, offering eternal life and communion wine. Later, in the 19th-century mining boom in the valley, up to 100,000 people in Jerome alone needed to be fed and watered, intensifying area agriculture including wine growing. Vines were ripped out during Prohibition, and the Depression was the beginning of the end of the mines. By mid-century, the population in Jerome fell below 100.

Tan and loose-limbed, Glomski has the kind of pale blue eyes that look like they've faded in the sun. He's spent a long time in it, longer than anyone in the business here. He originally arrived in the late 80's to attend nearby Prescott College and fell in love with the naked geography, shorn of topsoil, but left for lush northern California, working his way from cellar rat to co-winemaker at David Bruce Winery. Eventually Arizona's magnetic pull compelled him to return in 2004 and take on the challenge of the stingy *terroir*, in time coaxing mineral-accented, Mediterranean-variety fruit.

"I wanted to be an artist," he says, eyes trained on his swirling glass, "and wines are expressions of places, like liquid landscapes."

He established Page Spring Cellars in 2004 beside the cottonwood-shaded Oak Creek and grows grapes both here and in the south, including the white peppery 2014 Grenache we've moved on to over pizza.

"People think the biggest challenges are heat and sun, but it's rain in the winter and freezing in the spring," he says. "There's a lot about Arizona people don't know."

If they know anything wine-related, it might be Arizona Stronghold Vineyards, which at just 13,000 cases annually – the average California winery makes 50,000 – is the largest winery in the state. Glomski founded it in 2007 with Maynard James Keenan, a Michigan expat and rocker who still tours the world with Tool.

"Around 1999, I started looking at the terrain in Jerome and the surrounding foothills and realized it looked a lot like places I'd seen in Spain and Italy," says Keenan, who dug his initial Caduceus Cellars vineyard himself outside of his tavern-style tasting room in Jerome. Brawny and profane, he epitomizes the roll-up-your-sleeves rebel spirit shared by Verde Valley winemakers.

Yet for all that swagger, his wines are unexpectedly good dinner companions, respectful of food. To make the case, he's just opened Merkin Vineyards Tasting Room & Osteria in Cottonwood, where his sangiovese-montepulciano blend mediates the richness of ragu. "We think people are coming around to low alcohol, elegant-with-dinner wines," he says. "Arizona wines are more Old World than you would expect."

An alleged act of claim-jumping busted up the Glomski-Keenan partnership three years ago with Glomski getting the Arizona Stronghold label, Keenan getting the vineyard in dispute and the local press gobbling up the divorce.

Personalities can be cactus-prickly in these parts, but perhaps it takes calloused determination to grow grapevines in the desert. At minimum, Arizona wine attests to the state's climactic range.

"People think it's cactus and tumbleweed but Arizona is very diverse with pine forests and snowcapped mountains," argues Corey Turnbull, winemaker at Burning Tree Cellars, who leads my next tour from a former car-dealership-turned-tasting-room in Cottonwood. "In Arizona, you've got to go up to find vineyards."

Leaning forward from a deep leather armchair, Turnbull relates his bootstrap story from troubled local kid to fledgling winemaker, saved from drugs by a love of wine he discovered as a bus boy at a Sedona restaurant. He worked his way up to sommelier and into Glomski's tutelage before launching Burning Tree as a side job to managing Arizona Stronghold's tasting room across the street. He pours me a seductive mourvedre-syrah-grenache blend and I fight the urge to sink back on the tufted couch as he talks science. "We have extreme diurnal shifts from 95 to 50 degrees. We get nice sugar production, but we don't get dark wines because we get so much sunlight. We have to do canopy shading. The cold nights give us acid retention so we get rich but balanced wines. Still, nobody gives us the time of day because we're growing fruit in Arizona."

Perhaps it is because these growers are so ambitious. Though wine is now produced in all 50 United States, winemakers in Arizona aim to nurture a comprehensive industry, starting with their own fledgling version of the University of California, Davis, the famous enology school. Established in 2009, the Southwest Wine Center, a division of Yavapai College in Clarkdale, expanded in 2014 to a repurposed racquetball court beside 13 acres of vineyards where students experiment with Spanish and Italian varieties known to develop a rustic Arizona accent with notes of high-desert herbs, mesquite trees and Palo Verde blossoms.

"California tends to be fruit forward. We tend to be more Old-World austere," says its director, Michael Pierce, who teaches budding entrepreneurs and second career-seekers in the art of winemaking while running his own wine label, Saeculum Cellars.

Some graduates move on to Four Eight Wineworks, a Clarkdale winemaking cooperative established by Maynard James Keenan in 2014 to allow fledgling vintners to share tools such as stemmers and wine presses, thus avoiding costly start-up investments. The first to "graduate" from the co-op, Chateau Tumbleweed occupies a former auto body shop in Clarkdale with a disco ball in the lively tasting room.

"There was a huge resurgence in the 2000s in this industry," says Joe Bechard, the winemaker among four partners in Chateau Tumbleweed as he pours samples of his bright 2015 albariño. "It's gone from a joke to serious and competitive."

Like Bechard, most area winemakers work their own tasting rooms, creating a personable sampling trail set against a grand backdrop of sandstone cliffs and the distant Mongollon Rim, the edge of the Colorado Plateau that moderates much of the weather here.

Operators who got here first, like Glomski, or have a big bankroll like the ranching family that runs the syrah-specialist D.A. Ranch, grow their own. Acquiring fruit elsewhere, many winemakers chased Sedona's tourists here, clustering along Cottonwood's once abandoned main street.

At our appointed meeting hour, Sam Pillsbury races across it with a paper sack containing a hefty Reuben sandwich that he generously shares over glasses of his award-winning syrah at Pillsbury Wine Company's tasting room.

"Cottonwood was dead, and now we're a gourmet destination for Phoenix," says Pillsbury, a New Zealand filmmaker in his first career – with Hollywood forays for films like "Free Willy 3." A winemaker in his second, he favors European over New World styles, rejuvenating forlorn towns and asking big questions of climate and compatibility.

"We're still finding out what varieties suit the place," says the self-described tinker, the appropriate mix of scientist, artist and evangelist for Arizona. "It's a lovely tasty experiment."

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