

# Desert Bloom

In Arizona's rugged wine country, experimental techniques are taking root. **Gina DeCaprio Vercesi** tours the state to meet the industry's maverick pioneers.



**A**S I ENTERED Verde Valley, about 90 miles north of Phoenix, saguaro-studded hillsides gave way to rolling scrubland. The buds had just broken in the high-desert vineyards—a lush start to my early May road trip through Arizona's wine country.

Friends had been skeptical when I mentioned my latest assignment. "They make wine in Arizona?" came the refrain. But grapevines do grow—and thrive—amid the

*Below:* Chateau Tumbleweed co-owners Joe Bechard and Kris Pothier. *Above:* Caduceus Cellars' high-desert vines in Verde Valley.

state's canyons and cacti, flourishing in a range of microclimates and at elevations of up to 5,500 feet. Temperatures fluctuate dramatically from day to night, fostering sugar development while preserving natural acidity. At the same time, winemakers navigate challenges like heavy summer rains, spring frost, and vine-crushing hail.

Few casual consumers know Arizona's wine story yet, despite its roots stretching back to 16th-century Spanish missionaries. In the 1880s, German immigrant Henry Schuerman planted Zinfandel along Verde Valley's Oak Creek; he sold his wine to cattle hands and copper miners. Pro-prohibition legislation slowed production from 1915 until the 1970s, when University of Arizona soil scientist Gordon Dutt planted test vineyards in the high desert. The results looked promising, and Arizona's modern-day wine industry began.

I'd come to meet trailblazing vintners in two of the state's American Viticultural Areas (AVAs), or federally recognized wine regions: Verde Valley, a newcomer established in late 2021; and, farther south, Sonoita/Elgin, established in 1983.

## VERDE VALLEY

My education began at **Chateau Tumbleweed**, where cofounder Joe Bechard explained why the state doesn't hang its hat on a single grape. "We're really experimental here," Bechard told me. "It's a lot of trial and error, especially with the whites, but it's that spirit of discovery that draws me in." For Bechard, that has involved tinkering with varieties like Aglianico, Graciano, and Sangiovese, which express the desert terroir beautifully.

I sipped a 2022 Picpoul Blanc, a single-varietal white, with Kris Pothier, another Tumbleweed cofounder. Fresh and smooth, with bright pops of citrus, it was perfect for a desert afternoon. "Arizona





winemakers work with so many different varietals,” she said, giving the flaxen liquid a swirl. “As climate change starts to impact what people can grow around the world, I think we’re a strong example of what works in hot, arid climates.”

To learn more, I visited Yavapai College’s **Southwest Wine Center**, which offers immersive “vineyard-to-bottle” programs at its 13-acre teaching vineyard and wine-making facility. I tried a student-crafted flight, which ranged from an apricot-scented Viognier to a bold Grenache-Tempranillo blend, with viticulture and enology director Michael Pierce. “The best thing about wine making in Arizona,” Pierce said, “is that this isn’t a place where you get pigeonholed stylistically.”

In the town of Cottonwood, about an hour’s drive east of Prescott, I checked in to the **Tavern Hotel** (doubles from \$229), a boutiquey, wine-themed property on Main Street. Each day, after a morning hike, I cruised between Clarkdale, Cornville, and Jerome—the Valley’s main hubs—choosing from a hit parade of wineries and tasting rooms.

I met Maynard James Keenan, a Verde Valley wine pioneer, at his forthcoming project, the **Caduceus Cellars & Merkin Vineyards Hilltop Facility**. We stood overlooking Cottonwood’s old town. “I’m exhausted by the ‘can they make wine in



Above: Steel columns greet visitors at Los Milics Vineyards, in the Sonoita/Elgin wine region.  
Below, from left: Full shelves at Dos Cabezas WineWorks; a glimpse of downtown Cottonwood; a Vera Earl pizza at Dos Cabezas.





Arizona?’ question,” Keenan said. “We’re making world-class wine.”

When the complex opens this fall, it will house a production space, a farm-to-table restaurant, and a room for exclusive tastings that Keenan likens to an omakase experience. The 4½ acres of grapevines, which include Graciano and Tempranillo, are growing strong.

### SONOITA/ELGIN

The next morning I headed south. In Sonoita, I dropped my bags at **Casa NextDoor @ Dos Cabezas** (from \$280), an invitingly rustic Airbnb adjacent to **Dos Cabezas WineWorks**. Over wood-fired pizzas on Dos Cabezas’s patio, winemaker Todd Bostock gave me his highlight reel of wines, starting with Principrana: a traditional-method sparkling white blend of Garnacha, Riesling, and Tempranillo. Part of the region’s old guard, Bostock came on the scene in 2002. Now he and his wife, Kelly, have 52 acres under vine in Sonoita and Willcox, the third of Arizona’s AVAs.

Ten minutes from Dos Cabezas, the weathered-steel columns of **Los Milics Vineyards** rose up from the high desert like something from a science-fiction film set. Founder Pavle Milic also co-owns the acclaimed restaurant **FnB** (entrées \$35–\$46), in Scottsdale, where he has showcased Arizona wines from the get-go. It’s been a leap of faith that earned FnB James Beard Award semifinalist spots for Outstanding Wine Program in 2017 and 2020. “Arizona wines are interesting,” Milic said. “They dance in this nebulous place between Old World and New.”

I spent my last afternoon at **Rune Wines**, where James Callahan’s varietals celebrate the magic of wild-yeast fermentation. “For the first twenty or so years of Arizona wine making, everyone was experimenting,” he said, pouring me a glass of Rune’s flagship Wild Syrah. “Now we just need to get our wine in front of people.”

I swirled and sipped, soaking in the view. Neat rows of vines, their leaves chartreuse with spring growth, met the untamed beauty of the high-desert grasslands. In the distance, the Mustang Mountains loped across the horizon. Arizona’s wine story may still be unsung, but I knew, with absolute certainty, that wouldn’t be the case for long.



## A FRESH CROP

South African winemaker Ntsiki Biyela is shaking up the industry—for good.

By Dorothy J. Gaiter

WINE MAKING WAS just one of countless professions Black South Africans were excluded from under the oppressive rule of apartheid. But that’s finally changing—almost three decades since the end of the racist system that cast Black citizens into low-skilled, underpaid roles.

One woman leading the charge is Ntsiki Biyela, who in 2004 became the country’s first Black female winemaker. In 2016, Biyela founded the award-winning **Aslina Wines**. The company, which takes its name from her maternal grandmother, is based at Delheim Wines, a family-owned estate in the Stellenbosch wine region where Biyela buys grapes, blends varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, and bottles the finished product.

Today, Biyela’s label is one of more than 80 Black-owned wine brands in South Africa. “At this moment, there’s hope for growth in the wine industry, of seeing more people of color becoming involved,” she says. That hope is thanks, in part, to Biyela’s efforts as a board member and advocate of the **Pinotage Youth Development Academy**. Established in 2012, the academy partners with more than 50 wineries in the greater Cape Winelands region outside Cape Town to train adults for professional opportunities in wine, hospitality, and tourism. “More than five hundred students have gone through the process,” Biyela says. “We have people in tasting rooms, in restaurants and hotels—even on cruise ships!—working as sommeliers and wine stewards. We can see the impact of what this program is doing, the lives it’s changing.”

Biyela is in a time of transition, too, as Aslina opened its first stand-alone tasting room this summer, in the town of Stellenbosch. Here, she shares her favorite places to sip and eat in and around Stellenbosch.

From top: Chef Vusi Ndlovu’s chicken yassa at Edge Africa, in Cape Town; Ntsiki Biyela at Delheim Wines.

### GO-TO BOTTLE

“Currently I’m drinking Aslina’s Chenin Blanc, which we released last year,” Biyela says. “It’s a skin-contact wine, which means we leave the skins on longer during production to create more tannin structure—it’s beautiful. My staff keeps me away from it because it’s so good I’d drink it all!”

### FLAVOR BOMB

“Edge Africa in Cape Town is wonderful,” Biyela says of the pop-up restaurant by chef Vusi Ndlovu, which was hosted by the Belmond Mount Nelson Hotel for four months earlier this year. (The concept is now reopening under a new name, **Mlilo, Fires of Africa**, at Time Out Market Cape Town.) “They use spices from all over the continent. My favorite dish is their steam bread, a soft bun traditionally known as *ujeqe*. It’s so comforting—I like to cook it at home, too.”

### CHEERS TO THAT

A store and community center in Stellenbosch, the **Wine Arc** opened in 2021 to help Black South Africans work in all levels of the industry. In addition to hosting wine tastings and panel sessions, “It’s a good place to taste and buy bottles from Black-owned wineries, including mine, and get a bite to eat,” Biyela says.

### IN GOOD TASTE

“You have beautiful views of Table Mountain at **Delheim Wines’** garden restaurant,” Biyela says. Plus, she has a soft spot for the Cape Malay chicken curry. One menu item is a donation to the **Pebbles Project**, which provides education, health care, and social services to farmworkers’ children.