

# Pioneering Palates

By Brendan Campbell  
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Arizona wine is defined by its exceptionally unique landscape, and the men and women who produce it reflect this singular character.

There is no wine-growing region on Earth like the Grand Canyon State, and the mysteries and pleasures of Arizona wine remain largely a secret to many. Nonetheless, the trailblazing winegrowers toiling on rocky hills and arid fields are quietly building a world-class movement, from the dirt up.

Terroir is what the initiates call it: the soil, climate, and terrain that determine the expression and flavors of wine grapes. While Arizona's landscape invokes stereotypes such as hot, dry, and nothing but desert; Eric Glomski, founder and owner of Page Springs Cellars and several other vineyards and wineries across the state, debunked these assumptions.

“Our challenge is cold and wetness, it's the exact opposite of what everybody thinks, and people just need to remember that Arizona is amazingly diverse elevationally,” said Glomski. “We have a little slice of all of North America somewhere in this state, so I think we can grow any grape on the planet here someday, we just need to find that right little niche.”

Across the state's three wine growing regions; Sonoita, Willcox, and the Verde Valley; a growing family of vintners are reaching back to Old World traditions, learning from each other, trailblazing with new varietals and techniques, and generally undermining the conventions of 'modern wines,' championed by California's Napa Valley.

“As more people live here, and the industry is growing, they're kind of growing together,” said Chris Beelendorf, a former sommelier and current account manager for wine at the boutique Phoenix distributor, Quail.

According to the last U.S. Department of Agriculture report, the upstart state reported at least 64 vineyards planting almost a thousand acres and bringing in over \$2.2 million in 2014. And wine tourism is creating over \$56 million dollars in revenue annually, growing 50 percent since 2011, according to Northern Arizona University.

This does bring with it its share of detractors.

“For Californians, the rest of America does not exist as a wine-producing state,” said Sam Pillsbury, owner and winegrower of Pillsbury Wine Company, whose vineyards are seated in 100 acres in Willcox, in Cochise County.

Pillsbury was familiarized with California and its wine culture as a Hollywood producer, although he may be best known for his 1984 award-winning New Zealand cult hit *The Quiet Earth*, which celebrity astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson lists in his top ten favorite sci-fi films.



Arizona Culinary Hall of Fame Winemaker of the Year - Sam Pillsbury

Pillsbury brought this signature creativity to the Arizona wine scene in the late '90s, when his imagination was captured by a \$12 bottle of Cochise County wine, bought on a whim.

“I opened that bottle that night, and in 25 years of drinking chard, I’d never tasted anything like it. And I knew it was terroir,” Pillsbury said. “I literally went down the next day and bought 40 acres next to that vineyard. That’s where my vineyard is now, and 75 percent of Arizona wine is now grown in the area right around my vineyard. It’s one of the most perfect places on Earth to grow wine.

In 2000 Pillsbury launched his first venture, in partnership with Al Buhl of Dos Cabezas WineWorks, and later sold to Glomski in order to focus on his own vision. His new career would also win many awards and is helping to build an international reputation for Arizona among more boutique connoisseurs.

“Goddammit, my 2015 Syrah just won a double gold in the San Francisco Chronicle, which was one of three double golds out of 55 entries from all over the United States. From my little piece of cheap dirt, down by the Mexican border,” Pillsbury declared in a mischievous New Zealand accent.

Pillsbury had re-discovered something Spanish Conquistadors stumbled on in the 16th century, when they used native grapes to produce Communion wine.

In the 1970s, pioneers like Dr. Gordon Dutt, of the University of Arizona, and founder of Sonoita vineyards, revived this tradition and began to modernize it. So-called Old World grapes, especially those identified with France’s Rhône Valley and Burgundy region, thrived in the high desert, with all its limestone and volcanic rock.

Today, science and experimentation have only begun to unravel the full potential of Arizona wine. On Nov. 11th, Dutt was among honorees at the inaugural Festival at the Farm and Founders Dinner at the University of Arizona Campus Agriculture Center. The two-day celebration, hosted by the Arizona Wine Growers Association, showcased 20 wineries and more than 120 wines, and raised funds for the university’s Arizona Wine Library and Research Center.

“This is still the first big step,” said Glomski, “we don’t even know what grapes to plant here yet.”

Among favorite Arizona varietals: Grenache, Syrah, Pinot Gris, and Viognier; all highly nuanced grapes that serve best to compliment food, and are often blended for maximum effect.

“Eric Glomski is a master blender... It’s like everybody else is painting in black and white, and Eric has, like the full palette,” said Beelendorf.

Glomski indeed sees his work as an art. He said his “epiphanal moment” came when an actual artist, living off the land outside of Prescott, helped him make a batch of apple wine from a small local orchard, and the magic of Arizona terroir first struck him.

“I smelled the wine at first, obviously, and then I tasted it. And the coolest thing happened, which was it really, really reminded me in this kind of deep, spiritual way, of that orchard,” he said. “I just realized that I could be an artist too, and I could capture landscapes in these liquid bottles. And after that I was possessed.”

Glomski left a master’s program in river ecology at Northern Arizona University, and went to volunteer in the wine harvest in California. He earned himself a job and cut his winemaking teeth under the Santa Cruz Mountains’ “Prince of Pinot Noir,” David Bruce.

But he always intended to return to Arizona, and when the time came he began a succession of growing projects from his Page Spring Cellars. Among them, possibly Arizona wine’s biggest claim to fame—especially among millennials—the 2007 Arizona Stronghold joint venture with the world-famous frontman of the rock bands Tool, A Perfect Circle, and Puscifer; Maynard James Keenan.

The two parted ways in 2014, and Glomski now leads Arizona Stronghold himself, but the project achieved an entirely new level of success for Arizona wine, at its peak distributing in 35 states, four Canadian provinces, and Australia. It also brought the wine, and its terroir, to some of the world's greatest palates.



Eric Glomski (right) and Page Spring Cellars Brand Ambassador Luke Bernard

“I don’t think California’s doing many Sangioveses like that,” said renowned wine critic and former editor of Wine Spectator, James Suckling, tasting a blend in the breakout 2010 documentary “Blood into Wine,” which centered on Keenan.

Suckling also compared the geography and volcanic soil of the Willcox region to “parts of the Rhone Valley,” and said it “reminds me of vineyards I’ve been to a number of times in Sicily.”

Current Stronghold head winemaker, Matthew Reica, also sees Arizona’s terroir as the heart of its industry, and the key to its success. He explained why, even at its scale, Arizona Stronghold relies on Old World techniques to bring out the best in their grapes and doesn’t expect to drastically expand anytime soon.

“If anywhere in Europe has a similar profile, in a winemaking sense, it would be Tuscany,” Reica said. “Arizona is not currently capable of making big, bold, modern-style wines... So it’s much easier, much more applicable for us to look back to our European cousins and how they do it, because we match up much better.”

While overseeing operations at Stronghold, Glomski continues to make breakthroughs from Page Springs Cellars today, where a 4,000 gallon-per-minute natural spring irrigates all the fields, and produce is grown on-site for the tasting room’s menu. Over the years, Page Springs Cellars has become known as a premiere destination for experiencing wine in Arizona.

Alongside traditional connoisseurs from around the state and far beyond, the original Glomski project also draws many millennials to its adventurous program, aligning perfectly with Glomski’s mission for education and innovation.

“Paige Springs has probably as beautiful a winery as anywhere; if you were in Sonoma, if you were in Napa, could be in France, Paige Springs Cellars is stunning. The wines are fantastic, and the setting is amazing,” said Beelendorf.

“For my 21st birthday I went there, so it was a really cool experience,” said Alexa Avila, a senior at Arizona State University’s downtown campus. She said her first flight of all-Arizona wine, along with the Southwestern hospitality, made the event a great memory.

At his home winery, Glomski himself embodies the connection between the land and the winemaker. On a sight that he surveyed years before for one of his river ecology projects, he produced 70 different wines last year, and is constantly testing the boundaries of the gorgeous Verde Valley.

Meanwhile, Arizona Stronghold remains Arizona’s largest vineyard and winery. Last year, it even took home the Arizona Republic Wine Competition’s Best of Show and swept almost every category.

“People who have tasted the wine recognize it as completely legitimate, world-class wine,” said Beelendorf, noting that Sonoita is very similar in altitude to most Washington vineyards, although it surprisingly gets about an inch more of annual rain. “California is known more for big, bold wines, and Arizona is more about finesse.”

“How Arizona’s going to compete is not going to be head to head,” said Beelendorf. “You know, it’s going to be more like a quick boxer fighting a power boxer. So you’re going to have some big Napa cabs versus maybe, a refined, refreshing Grenache and Viognier that you can’t find in California... Viognier is an example of an expensive wine to make that we have a much better value of production for.”

As for quality, Beelendorf compared Arizona’s rise as a national competitor to the movie “Bottle Shock,” about the 1976 “Judgement of Paris,” when California bested French wine on its own soil in a blind taste test.

“That’s kind of what Arizona is going through now, except that it’s against Napa, it’s against Oregon,” he said. “There’s no way that Arizona is ever going to produce Pinot and Cab. It’s not the right climate, and those are really what drive the market in California. What we’re going to be able to produce are different varietals with a whole different style, and I think it will just really compliment extremely well!

...Just nobody tell that to Eric.