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Wine Tasting Like a Rock Star

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Want to experience the definition of homegrown? Cottonwood’s Merkin Vineyards Tasting Room & Osteria could be your answer.

The restaurant, which opened in 2016, offers its customers an alluring experience, where everything from the pasta to the wine is made in the Verde Valley. The restaurant is located at 1001 N. Main Street,

Cottonwood.

Merkin Vineyards is a division of Caduceus Cellars, touted as a small, family-owned operation. Both the business and restaurant have sprouted nicely since the first grapevines were planted.

Caduceus Cellars is owned by winemaker Maynard James Keenan, a Grammy award-winning artist and the lead singer of three bands – Tool, Puscifer and A Perfect Circle. The Arizona brand has produced wines that have won national and international awards.

The customers “get an immersive experience,” Keenan said, “one hundred percent Arizona wines paired with Arizona produce and house-made pastas, breads and gelato. Our ducks provide the eggs for our pastas and quiche. Our greenhouses, gardens and orchards provide a significant amount of produce for our menu.”

Keenan moved to Jerome in 1995, where he owns two tasting rooms and a record store. His other tasting room is located in Old Town Scottsdale. He and others help farm 110 acres in Willcox and the Verde Valley combined – a key factor in making the wine unique.

“We grow our own fruit, which, in our opinion, makes a significant difference in the final result,” he said.

National Sales Director Calvin Arnold says the soil in a particular region plays a big role in the end product. “I have brought winemakers here and some of them will

absolutely reach into the ground and pick up and taste a rock. That will tell them kind of the story of that place.”

Arnold said the environment around the vineyard could also change the way the wine tastes. “I mean, you may have flowers growing right next to the vineyard,” Arnold said. “The bees and the pollen – some of the characteristics and things like lavender can absolutely find their way into the soil. Just coming outside of Sedona, that’s ancient sea there. There are some times where you may be able to pick up saline because there is still saline and salt in that soil.”

The wine growers stick to what works best with varieties of grapes that thrive in Arizona’s hot, dry conditions. Wines can range from \$20 to more than \$100 per bottle, depending on the type and brand. Red wines found in the Spain and Portugal region, such as Tempranillo and Grenache, and a white wine, Alvarinho, are among those featured at the tasting room locations.

“With us, it was a lot of trial and error,” Arnold said. “Ultimately, we are in Arizona. It’s an up-and-coming region. Even though we may have liked this particular grape, it didn’t want to be here.”

But what did want to be here has found its market. The wine is sold in Australia and New Zealand, along with 43 U.S. states. “Some guy called me and it was the middle of the night,” Arnold said. “I’m like, ‘Where are you?’ He said he was in Hobart, Tasmania.” A local bar was hosting a Caduceus Merkin wine tasting event and there was a line to get in.

Arnold encourages Arizona residents to make a day trip out of visiting Cottonwood and Jerome. In Jerome, guests can sip wine and get a haircut at the in-house barber at Caduceus, or pick up a vinyl or two at the record store. Wine enthusiasts can experience tasting rooms by different businesses on both sides of the street. The area is a short drive to the Southwest Wine Center in Clarkdale.

“We want people to experience Arizona,” Arnold said. “Whether you already live here or not, we’d like to show off our little corner.”

By Brent Ruffner, QCBN

For more information, visit caduceus.org or merkinvineyards.org.

