

Finding wine country in a beer state like Colorado

By **Alison Bowen**

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It's the breeze, they say, that creates plump grapes and a wine destination in the heart of hops country.

Dubbed the "Million Dollar Breeze" by locals, winds waft in over the Grand Mesa, one of the largest flat-topped mountains in the world and a keystone geographical feature here. Air flows between canyon walls, warming and then flowing out over wineries nestled near the Grand Mesa's base.

The 4,700-foot-high climate, featuring sunny days, dry air and cool nights, finesses what local winemakers say are globally unique elements for their craft.

In a state known for breweries, people in Palisade want to make sure Colorado is squarely on the map — as a confident marker, not a curiosity — when people plan travel toward wine tastings.

Palisade is a town of about 2,700, about four hours west of Denver along Interstate Highway 70. It boasts two-thirds of the state's vineyard acreage and more than a quarter of the overall wineries. Vines twist together, creating a picture-perfect foreground framed by the Grand Mesa's ridges.

"It's a really well-kept secret," said Jay Christianson, owner of Canyon Wind Cellars.

Also known for peaches, lavender and alpacas — yes, alpacas — the town slogan, "Life tastes good here all year round," reflects the 25 area wineries.

Unlike rambling go-to vino destinations such as Napa, 22 wineries are within a 7-mile radius.

Doug Caskey, executive director of the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board, said grapes for both reds and whites grow well — from syrahs and grenaches to rieslings.

"It's hard to say Colorado has one signature wine, because we have such a diversity of climates," he said.

In national wine tastings and competitions, he said, "the wine is received remarkably well. People are just dumbfounded that we can make wine as good as we do here in Colorado."

The geography pins Palisade as an on-the-way or short-drive destination for many. It's about a two-hour drive from cities like Moab in Utah and Aspen, Vail and Telluride in Colorado.

"We're actually seeing a huge growth in our tourism," said Juliann Adams, executive director of the Palisade Chamber of Commerce, "not just in numbers but also where they're coming from."

Tasting rooms have seen an uptick in visitors from outside Colorado, she said. Surveying visitors to last year's Palisade Peach Festival, about 23 states were represented.

Instead of leaving after buying a box of peaches, visitors increasingly stick around.

"The wineries give people the reason to really stay a while in Palisade," Adams said. "You can do quite a few wineries in a short trip, and most of the time the owners and/or the winemakers are right there, and they're the ones you can talk directly to."

Palisade's quaint downtown includes an art studio, [The Blue Pig Gallery](#), with mountain-inspired paintings, and Slice O' Life Bakery (970-464-0577), offering doughnuts and pumpernickel bread. In a restaurant like [Palisade Cafe](#), where local wines are on the menu, it's not unusual to hear, "Are you going to the wineries?" Even a summer yoga series skips around, stopping at a winery — the fee includes a post-workout drink.

While in other destinations a group might rent a limo, walking or biking to wineries is common. Although some wineries have been around long enough to collect distinctions, others are new enough that at most places, tastings are still free. Bottles range from a \$13 riesling at [DeBeque Canyon Winery](#), to a \$100 blended red, the 2012 IV, at [Canyon Wind Cellars](#). Most tasting rooms are open year-round, excluding holidays.

Some proudly tout awards (Grande River Vineyards boasts a winning cabernet franc in the World Value Wine Challenge); others prize a casual image. At [Carlson Vineyards](#), winemakers pose the question, "Why make drinking wine complicated?" and playful names include Tyrannosaurus Red and Laughing Cat Sweet Baby White.

So many busloads of international tourists have arrived — they often fly into Denver and drive the four hours through the mountains — that some wineries have started charging for tastings.

Canyon Wind is getting maxed out on the weekends: As many as 500 people can come through on a summer weekend on their way to Vegas or traveling from Sweden, New Zealand or China.

Now the tasting room feels full with 10 people. It used to be his father's office — the elder Christianson planted the first vines in 1991 with the help of Napa winemaker Robert Pepi, and when tourists arrived, he'd simply throw a white bedsheet over desk clutter.

"My father was a firm believer that nobody would ever come to western Colorado to be a tourist," Christianson said. Now, he said, they're planning a larger tasting space.

The 50 acres, which Christianson took over in 2009 with his wife Jennifer, include nine different kinds of grapes. When they met, she'd tried wine about six times.

Winemakers range from relatively new experimenters to family-owned generations.

At [Maison la Belle Vie](#), winemaker and chef John Barbier incorporates elements from France, where his family has tended grapevines for more than a century.

Recent French traces included a "Bienvenue" welcome sign and the barista, a student from France who arrived a month earlier. Bike racks were fashioned from wine barrels, and labels for rich reds inspired by playing cards.

Many who come for a tasting opt to buy a glass or bottle and enjoy the view in the courtyard, where mountains frame the bloom-accented vineyards.

At [Red Fox Cellars](#), named after animals seen scurrying around the vineyard, owner Sherrie Hamilton said when they opened in September they needed to stand out.

"Each one of our wines reflects that," she said.

So they've aged them in a bourbon barrel, adding a smoky, rich taste to, for example, the best-selling Bourbon Barrel Merlot, aged in barrels from Colorado distilleries.

Also unique, Red Fox offers hard ciders and mixed drinks, like an Old Fashioned that pairs the merlot with cherries, simple syrup and club soda.

Rachel Romero, who pours at Red Fox and another tasting room in town, grew up nearby. She noted how the region "just took off" in recent years, tourists arriving with winery-packed itineraries.

"I get surprised by how many people are coming to town just for that," she said.

abowen@tribpub.com

Twitter @byalisonbowen

How to taste

Biking is big in Palisade. Bikes are available to rent at [Rapid Creek Cycles](#). Even those who don't regularly get on two wheels can try out the 5- or 7-mile loop. (Maps are available [here](#).) Routes are well marked by signs noting the Colorado Fruit & Wine Byway, which meanders past orchards, lavender farms and locals' homes. Although bike lanes aren't yet fully in action, vehicles are respectful and traffic manageable. Not every business is on the map, but that allows for stumbling across discoveries. Rapid Creek offers helmets, water and maps. When you return your bike after most wineries close at 5, stop in at [Peach Street Distillers](#) or [Palisade Brewing Co.](#), which stay open a bit later.

When to visit

In the summer, enjoy a farmers market with bands and cooking demonstrations. Prime wine time would be Sept. 17-20, when the town hosts the [Colorado Mountain Winefest](#), featuring a grape stomp, demonstrations and dozens of wineries. Experience it on two wheels with the Tour de Vineyards, a 25-mile ride.

Where to stay

Various motels and hotels serve the area, along with B&Bs. Catering to wine fiends is the [Wine Country Inn](#), which offers bottles from neighboring Grande River Vineyards. Mountains are visible from the pool and outdoor patio, where visitors can dine at the Tapestry Lounge, drawing even locals for dinner. A complimentary, robust hot breakfast is offered in the mornings.

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