



VINTAGE CYCLING: PALISADE VINEYARD CRUISING (LEFT), TASTING AT BLACK BRIDGE WINERY (TOP RIGHT), GRAPES AT HIGH COUNTRY ORCHARDS (BOTTOM RIGHT).

The Grape Escape

Colorado's Western Slope has been decreed "up and coming wine country." If you don't believe the hype—go taste for yourself. And bring your bike.

By Jayme Moyer

Welcome to bike-touring paradise. You wake to birds chirping in the apple orchard outside your window. The scent of pumpkin bread hits your nose as soon as you start down the narrow Victorian staircase to the kitchen. Margaux, owner of the **Hansen Mesa Bed & Breakfast** (970-872-4444), is already in the kitchen whipping up blueberry pancakes. Fresh squeezed juice and warm pumpkin bread are waiting on the table.

After a hearty breakfast, you're back in the saddle for another day exploring Colorado's wine country by bike. You've got ten vineyards on the list today, including the award-winning **Alfred Eames Cellars** (alfredeamescellars.com), and **Leroux Creek Vineyards** (lerouxcreekinn.com), owned by a jolly Frenchman. Picturesque country roads connect the vineyards, routes where you're apt to see more tractors than cars.

Here, wine country is still blissfully commercial-free, with no ritzy hotels, no crowds and no outrageously overpriced dinners. Colorado's nearly 100 wineries are small family-owned estates creating a variety of wines, from deep Merlots to expressive Chardonnays. Besides grapevines, the fertile valleys contain fruit orchards (Palisade peaches are famous nationwide), farms and ranches. Locals who've worked the land for three generations live beside a vibrant ex-pat community of foodies and artists drawn to the agrarian values and burgeoning slow food movement.

Kind of makes you wonder... why has such an authentic slice of Americana remained under the radar? Simple, until recently, the wine was, shall we say, unbalanced. Winemakers were lured

by Colorado's abundant sunshine, warm days, cool nights and low humidity—seemingly perfect conditions to create award winning wines. But their craft was complicated by other weather challenges, mainly early freezes that forced winemakers to pick the grapes before they were fully ripe, or risk losing the entire crop to the chill.

"You'd save the crop, but the grape wasn't quite ripe enough for the sugars to have balanced out the acids, which isn't going to produce a top-quality wine," says Theresa High, owner of **High Country Orchards** (highcountryorchards.com) and **Colterris Winery** (colterris.com), home of the award-winning Colterris Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc.

After several decades of trial and error, Colorado winemakers are starting to get it right. Some, like High, risk an early freeze and leave the grapes on the vine until the sugar brix and acid levels are in balance. Others focus only on the heartiest cold-weather varietals like Riesling. "We can absolutely produce premium world-class wine in Colorado," says High. "It's just a matter of matching the right varietal with the right conditions. We've come a long way, quality-wise, in the last five years."

HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

The best time to visit the Western Slope is mid-July through the end of August, when the grapes are ripening and the orchard harvest yields a bounty of peaches, apples and cherries. Or wait until September, when temps are a bit cooler and it's crush time, marked by the **Colorado Mountain Winefest** (coloradowinefest.com) in Palisade September 13–16. Be sure to pre-register for the bicycle Tour de Vineyards on the 15th, covering 25 scenic miles of wine tasting.

If you have a weekend, plan for one day in each of the two federally designated appellations in Colorado: the Grand Valley and the West Elks AVAs (American Viticultural Areas). Together, these regions produce 90 percent of the wine grapes grown in Colorado.

GRAND VALLEY AVA

The area along the Colorado River between Palisade and Grand Junction is the epicenter of Colorado wines, with four times as many vineyards as the West Elks AVA. If you have an extra day, plan to spend it here, or keep your tastings concentrated in one section, like around the city of Palisade. Follow signs for the **Palisade Fruit and Wine Byway** (facebook.com/PalisadeFruitandWineByway), a 29-mile trail that starts four miles off of I-70, guiding motorists and cyclists through the best of the Grand Valley, from vineyards to orchards to lavender gardens.

WEST ELKS AVA

The area along the North Fork of the Gunnison River between Paonia and Hotchkiss houses the nation's highest elevation vineyards, up to 7,000 feet. Most of the wineries are connected by the West Elks Wine Trail, navigable by bike or car. Contact the **Paonia Chamber of Commerce** (paoniachamber.com) to request a map. Be sure to hit **Delicious Orchards** (deliciousorchardstore.com) for lunch, a lively pick-your-own orchard with an organic café serving up soup, salad, sandwiches, chili, burritos, tamales and, of course, Colorado wines. •

sideways SINGLETRACK

John Eckert founded **Galaxy Bike and Sport** (galaxybikeandsport.com) in 2005 as a bike repair shop inside a refurbished school bus. Today, the yellow vehicle sits parked beside the official store in Paonia that sells everything from bikes to cycling apparel to art. Stop in for a true eclectic bike shop experience and to get the beta on locals' only mountain biking trails, which aren't necessarily BLM-approved, but worth every under-the-radar moment. —J.M.