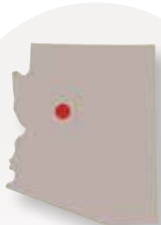


How Green Was My Valley

Food, wine, and history blossom along Arizona's Verde River

BY MATT JAFFE

The monsoon clouds began to break up and the high desert expanses of Arizona's Verde Valley suddenly glowed golden under the late afternoon sun as my wife, Becky, and I drove the final stretch toward Cottonwood. When I first visited more than 20 years ago, the town slumbered steps away from the forest that traces the course of the Verde River, while the old mining community of Jerome, a few miles up the road, was a tumbledown ghost town. And nobody



was thinking of raising wine grapes in the Verde Valley. Now, Cottonwood is a foodie hot spot, Jerome has sprung to life, and nearby Clarkdale offers compelling attractions. "Wow, this place is totally different from what I remember as a kid," said Becky, who used to come out from New Jersey during summers to visit her grandparents in nearby Prescott. Exploring the Verde Valley reveals a sometimes-overlooked part of Arizona where a growing sophistication and timeless landscapes find an easy balance.

[on track]

When I was 4, I rode with my family on Santa Fe's Super Chief between Chicago and Los Angeles, so there was no way Becky and I would miss the four-hour excursion in a vintage coach on the **Verde Canyon Railroad**. We boarded the train in Clarkdale and traveled above the Verde River and through narrow red rock canyons, where walls of sandstone soared hundreds of feet above us. A recorded narration and enthusiastic staffers brought alive the canyon's history, while a loop of train-themed songs by the likes of Johnny Cash and the Grateful Dead provided the soundtrack. Coach class: adults, \$64.95; ages 2-12, \$44.95. First class: \$89.95. (800) 582-7245; verdecanyonrr.com.

On High

A mile high on Cleopatra Hill, **Jerome** looks more substantial than you'd expect for a ghost town. Sure, it has shaky shacks along the stairways and steep streets cut into the hill, but solid brick buildings survive from Jerome's heyday—the town boomed until the mine closed in 1950. Some have galleries showcasing crafts and paintings by the artists who have settled here. Invariably your gaze will drift to the panorama that looks across the Verde Valley to the red cliffs of Sedona and all the way to the San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff. jeromechamber.com.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY VERDE CANYON RAILROAD; CHRIS PUTNAM/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



[food stuff]

Artisanal Munchies

New York expatriates Marat and Jennifer Shkandin, who first came upon Verde Valley while on their cross-country honeymoon drive, opened **Little Moo's Gourmet Market** in Cottonwood earlier this year. Try the handcrafted nut butters (we went with peanut cashew) made by North Carolina's Big Spoon Roasters, and beer jellies from Vermont's Potlicker Kitchen. (928) 852-0001; littlemoos.com.

Pizza and Play

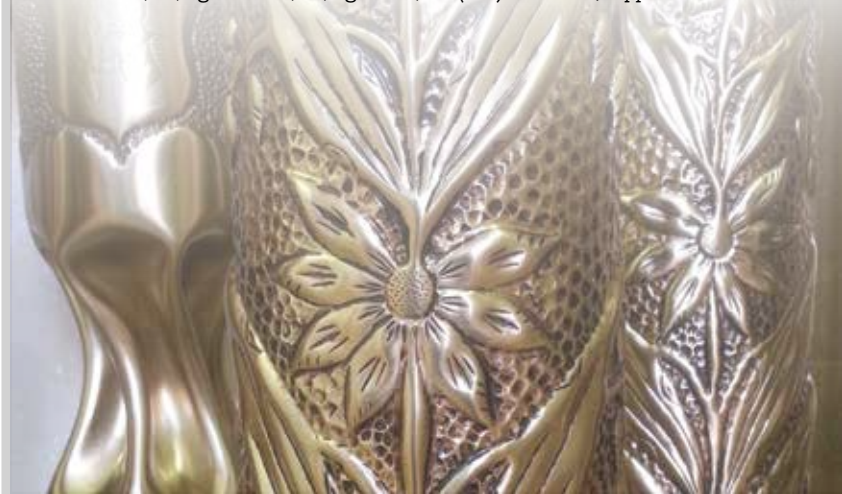
In a renovated 1930s auto shop with an exposed wood beam ceiling, **Pizzeria Bocce** captures Cottonwood's blend of cool and classic. Chef Michelle Jurisin makes the wood-fired Neapolitan-style pizzas (pictured) with flour imported from Italy. We went with the Funghi, topped with sautéed mushrooms, truffle oil, and three cheeses—plus the house-made sausage, at our server's suggestion. And yes, Bocce has a bocce court, as well as patio seating along a fire pit. (928) 202-3597; boccecottonwood.com.

**Territorial Cuisine**

On the day we dined at **Up the Creek** in Cornville, Oak Creek ran orange with sandstone dirt washed down by a monsoon rainstorm. Hummingbirds darted from feeder to feeder and then back into the forest as we considered the restaurant's "territorial cuisine," with everything from burgers to a crusted rainbow trout raised at a local hatchery. (928) 634-9954; upthecreekaz.com.

[heavy metal] **ARIZONA COPPER ART MUSEUM**

I lingered until closing at this museum, which is located in Clarkdale's restored 1928 high school. The collection ranges from cookware and architectural embellishments to ornate **trench art** (pictured)—spent artillery shell casings embossed with elaborate designs that World War I soldiers hammered into the metal between battles. But sometimes it's the more familiar items that grab people's attention. "Visitors see the pots and pans and say, 'Hey that's just like what my grandmother used,'" said museum founder Drake Meinke. Adult admission, \$9; ages 10–17, \$3; ages 5–9, \$1. (928) 649-1858; copperartmuseum.com.



[and wine]



With a deck overlooking vineyards along Oak Creek and a tasting room in a modern barn-style building, Page Springs Cellars, a Cornville winery celebrated for its Rhône varietals, is a top stop along the **Verde Valley Wine**

Trail. A half-mile away, boutique Javelina Leap Vineyard and Winery takes advantage of the region's hot days and cool nights to produce acclaimed Syrahs and zinfandels. Both wineries offer snacks and light meals. (928) 634-7593; vwinetrail.com.

[let us help]

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HIT THE TRAIL EARLY

While Becky slept in, I hiked from Cottonwood on the Jail Trail and into **Dead Horse Ranch State Park** along the Verde. A great blue heron waded in the shallows and a river otter splashed into the water before a pair of fledgling Cooper's hawks called loudly from the trees. \$7 per vehicle. (928) 634-5283; tinyurl.com/jnzqunx.

SLEEP IN

At Cottonwood's **Tavern Hotel**, spacious rooms decorated with contemporary art have plank wood floors and huge walk-in showers featuring mosaic tile detail. Next door, the **Tavern Grille** is a lively restaurant with a nice selection of Arizona craft beers. Rates start at \$169. (928) 639-1669; thetavernhotel.com.