

PHOENIX NewTimes

Wine School

Why Arizona Wine Isn't a Non Sequitur

By Hannah E Williams, Wed., Apr. 20 2011 @ 1:38PM

School's in session, on your terms: We're asking the Valley's top wine gurus to answer all your wine-related queries, tackling them one at a time each Wednesday, so we can all stress less and pour more. Today's teacher: Arizona Wine Growers Association President and Lawrence Dunham Vineyards Co-Owner Peggy Fiandaca.



Photo Courtesy of the Arizona Wine Growers Association
Past Arizona Wine Growers Association President Todd Bostock
"passes the bottle" to newly elected President Pedy Fiandaca.

Growing grapes and making wine in Arizona? Is that even possible? Better question: Is that even drinkable? If you've been around the block to Sonoita, Willcox and the Verde Valley, you know that the answer to both of those questions is an overwhelming affirmative... but if you're like us, we're still wondering what the hell these winemakers were thinking, so we asked: **Why Arizona?**

"It wasn't until we tasted some **Keeling-Schaefer** wines and were just blown away by the quality that we thought we could jump in," says **Peggy Fiandaca**, the recently elected **president of the Arizona Wine Growers Association** who started **Lawrence Dunham Vineyards** with her husband Curt Lawrence Dunham four years ago.

"**Arizona has more affordable, quality land**," Fiandaca says. "The soils and the climate were perfect for the Rhone grape varietals that we love."

The territory was still, however unchartered. "The grapes are teaching us every day, and we're trying to respond," Fiandaca explains. "It's a small wine industry and a very collaborative one."

Traveling to the various wine regions of the world and connecting with winery owners, Fiandaca and Dunham fantasized about one day starting their own vineyard, which proved to be their biggest challenge.

"Everyone romanticizes the wine lifestyle," Fiandaca says. "**Bottom line: It's farming.** And with farming, lots of things are unpredictable and out of your control, like mother nature."

The Lawrence Dunham winery has lost at least 2,000 vines to the weather, Fiandaca estimates; plus, dozens more to unusual pests. The four-year journey from raw land to releasing the first wines in December 2010 has been trying, Fiandaca says.

Lowering the learning curve is the collective spirit of the winery owners.

"Instead of just visiting the tasting rooms and drinking lots of wine in Sonoma and Napa, we made appointments with the winemakers," explains Fiandaca. "We would talk to the grape growers and the wine makers trying to understand how they turned their grapes into great wine, which has helped us tremendously."

When pressed, Fiandaca says the doubters should come out for a litmus test: "Come visit and let us show you that it can be done and is being done," she says. "**Maybe we need more blind taste-testings to show how we can beat out other wines from around the world.**"



Courtesy of Lawrence Dunham Vineyards
Curt Lawrence Dunham at the vineyard...
in the dirt.

The best time to visit?

- **Vine planting** begins in late **spring**.
- **Flowers bud** in late **April** and into **May**.
- By **June**, the **grapes** are starting to appear.
- The grapes undergo **véraison**, or turn purple, in **July**.
- And **harvest** can begin as early as the end of **August** and continue through **October**.

"We've always loved the ability to connect with the passion that folks have about what they're doing, and now that we're literally on the other side of the barrel we get to tell people about our journey," Fiandaca says, inviting people to come poke around and see what Arizona wine is all about.

Check out Arizona-grown wines at the **Prescott Fine Art and Wine Festival May 7-8** or the **Willcox Wine Country Spring Festival coming up May 14-15**.

(Or just wait until the Valley gets unbearably hot mid-summer like us and trek out to the wineries for some August relief, just in time for the grape crush.)

"**Pretty soon people are going to realize that we can produce world-quality wines in Arizona,**" Fiandaca says. "And recognize that we are already."