



Food and Wine in Cochise



It's such a treat to discover a top-notch culinary scene when it's a bit of a surprise like in a smaller town. Writer Sandy Bornstein and her husband discovered wonderful food, beer, wine, chocolate, and so much more when they visited Cochise County, Arizona.



Seafood stew entree from Indochine.

Sampling Food and Award-Winning Wine in Cochise County, Arizona

Year-round visitors come to Cochise County, Arizona to hike its incredible terrain, check out the migratory birds, and learn about the region's history. During our five-day visit, we also sampled foods and were introduced to local wines at the Willcox Wine Country May Festival.

BISBEE

Back in the late 19th century, Bisbee was the largest city between St. Louis, Missouri and San Francisco, California. Today, visitors come back to this former mining town to enjoy its history and hospitality.

Contessa's Cantina

On our first night, we dined at one of the town's Mexican restaurants. We weren't looking for anything out of the ordinary, just simple southwestern cuisine. Our outside table offered a relaxed dining experience. I offset the slightly spicy salsa and chips

with a strawberry margarita served in a mega-sized goblet.



A margarita at Contessas Cantino in Bisbee.

Tacos with minced pieces of fish were my first choice while my husband Ira's hearty appetite was satisfied with a hefty sized fajita tray. We shared an order of flan to satisfy my sweet tooth.

It was a fun way to complete our first day in Cochise County.

[Old Bisbee Brewery Company](#)

Our itinerary included a midday stop at this brewery. While I rarely indulge in alcoholic beverages at lunchtime, we couldn't pass up the opportunity to taste one of the brewery's craft beers made with local ingredients. I definitely could taste the strong hints of orange flavor with a splash of vanilla in the blood orange haze IP. Ira ordered

the Old Man Winter, a Belgian-style dark ale with a hint of orange peel.

To complement our midday break, Brandy Fischer, the Marketing and Distribution representative, suggested the Roka's chili, a meatless chili made with textured vegetable protein. We both were amazed, since this vegetarian product looked and tasted exactly like ground beef.



Roka's vegetarian chili at Old Bisbee Brewery.

SIERRA VISTA

As the hummingbird capital of the United States, many birders are drawn to the area. But, the community also welcomes people to explore its [rich history](#) and Sky Island [trails](#). After full days of walking non-stop, our appetites were soaring.

[Pizzeria Mimosa](#)

Just looking at the name of the restaurant, I anticipated a pizza joint. To our complete surprise, we encountered so much more. From the handcrafted mozzarella in the burrata to the decadent tiramisu, the Italian food and the service were noteworthy.



Salmon entree at Pizzeria Mimosa.

Yes, they do serve Neapolitan, wood-fired pizza, but our individual choices were considerably more complicated. After the burrata, we each selected a healthy salad. Both the Caesar and the seasonal green salad satisfied our desire to consume some veggies. We both savored our respective entrees— salmon alla griglia and filetto in salsa bruna. Not only did both entrees taste remarkable, the presentations photographed well.

The owner, Vicki Gilbert, made the rounds, dividing her time between the open kitchen area and the tastefully decorated dining room full of customers. During our chat, we learned about Vicki's commitment to bringing authentic cuisine to the county by utilizing her family's Italian research coupled with her own research. Vicki's hard work and commitment were evident in both the quality of the food and the exemplary service.



Tiramisu for dessert at Pizzeria Mimosa.

[Hoppin' Grapes: Wine and Beer Tasting Shop](#)

Within a few blocks of our hotel, we were offered a unique treat. This low-key “lounge-style bar” has a super chill environment. We sipped on glasses of wine as we munched on a specially prepared cheese platter. If we didn’t have a hectic travel itinerary, I would have been content to relax and unwind a bit longer in this comfortable environment.



Enjoy a glass of wine at Hoppin' Grapes.

[Indochine](#)

Even though Chef Tony grew up in a culture where men rarely cook, he developed a passion for food. As an English speaking Vietnamese tour guide, his interests in food preparation were enhanced. He eventually switched careers and became a trained chef.

In Sierra Vista, Chef Tony shares his family's favorite Vietnamese foods with his customers. Like other successful restaurateurs, he greets customers and tries to cater the restaurant's dishes to what the community is seeking. He does his best to incorporate the latest trends—paleo, gluten-free, vegan, Whole 30—into his menus.

When he opened seven years ago, the restaurant's menu was limited to a little more than a dozen options. Today, customers have approximately 50 choices. About 20% of the seasonal vegetables are grown in his own garden.

With so many choices and limited time to review the menu, we left the ordering to Chef Tony. We weren't disappointed with our Asian lunchtime feast.



A sampling of appetizers at Indochine.

WILLCOX

[Willcox Wine Country May Festival](#)

Until I started researching the popular attractions in Cochise County, I was unaware of the county's award-winning vineyards or the fact that 75% of Arizona's wine is produced in this region.

Twice a year, thousands gather at historic Railroad Park in the rural southeastern Arizona town of Willcox to attend one of Fodor Travel's top 10 wine festivals. These weekend-long events occur in both May and October and currently showcase 18 local wineries, dozens of arts and craft vendors, live music, and numerous food options.

We met the town's mayor, Mike Laws, who handed us vouchers to be redeemed for complimentary tickets, two wine goblets and a Wines of Willcox brochure detailing the location of the vineyards and wine tasting rooms. Anyone coming to Cochise County at other times of the year can easily use [this map](#) to arrange a wine tasting adventure.



Award winning wines from Pierce Vineyard.

The spring and fall Willcox Wine Country festivals offer a convenient way for out-of-towners to taste the area's top wine choices. Out of the dozens of wines tasted during

a separate event sponsored by the Beverage Tasting Institute, an independent alcohol tasting company based in Chicago, many of the local vineyards were awarded notable ratings that were showcased at the vineyards' kiosks.

While working our way through the kiosks, we stopped to nibble a few samples of delicious chocolate and caramel candies labeled baby desert tortoises at [Untamed Confections](#). Tom and Linda create their collection of organic, handmade sweets in the Sonoran Desert near Tubac, Arizona. By late afternoon, many of their more popular items had sold out.



A stop for sweets during the Willcox Wine Festival.

Kate Cox, from the Cochise County Tourism Council, recommended that we taste the food prepared at the [Dante's Fire](#) kiosk, a Tucson new American cuisine restaurant. Chef Kenneth Foy had catered the benefit dinner the night before. The limited menu offered some intriguing selections. We were impressed with the chilled cucumber and brie soup with blackened shrimp and the healthy Caprese salad served with balls of

fresh mozzarella. The wait time ebbed and flowed as the chefs continued to keep pace with the people standing in line.



An elegant salad from Dante's Fire.

[Big Tex BBQ](#)

Before leaving the business district and heading back to our hotel, we relaxed after a hectic day in a former 20th-century railroad passenger car where we enjoyed dinner at one of the town's local hangouts. We overheard patrons talking about a spring 2018 fire that shuttered the restaurant for months. This landmark eatery was completely renovated and then reopened last February.

It has been years since we shared a basket of crispy onion rings. I savored each one because I knew it might be another decade or so before I indulged again.

My beer-battered Alaskan cod came in two long strips. I held off on the French fries and instead doubled the portion of coleslaw. Ira chowed down on a sliced barbeque beef sandwich stuffed into a homemade roll garnished with onions, pickles, jalapenos, and barbeque sauce.



Strips of cod and cole slaw at Big Tex BBQ.

Whenever we took a break from our outdoor adventures and museum visits, we were pleasantly surprised by the wide variety of tasty food options in the smaller towns we visited. Based on our limited sampling of food and wine, we feel confident that our dining experiences in Cochise County, Arizona, represent a cross-section of the available dining experiences.

To learn more about Cochise County, visit their website, [here](#).

— Story by Sandy Bornstein. Photos by The Traveling Bornsteins.

Disclosure: Cochise County Tourism Council hosted the author's visit.

Hungry for more? Read about some other areas in Tucson, Arizona; read how Sandy celebrated her birthday San Diego style; and the regional food she discovered across the county in South Carolina. Learn more about how RealFoodTraveler.com got its start in this article.

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The Food & Wine Scene in Cochise County, AZ

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Categories: Real Cities, Southwest, Arizona, Real Travel • By Sandy Bornstein • November 2, 2019 •

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Sandy has visited more than 40 countries and lived as an international teacher in Bangalore, India. Sandy’s award-winning book, *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life*, is a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Sandy writes about food, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting

land and water experiences, historical sites, and Jewish culture and history. You can follow Sandy on Facebook and Instagram.

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