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Biking Colorado's Wine Country

By STEFANI JACKENTHAL

THE early-morning sun warms the back of my neck as a friend and I pedal along the open road, rolling past dangling peaches as well as grapes hanging in little clumps on parallel rows of trellised vines. Up ahead, a wood-frame chunk of white rock bearing the vineyard's name signals the entrance to the Plum Creek Winery, and we turn down a short pebbly road and spot a seven-and-a-half-foot metal fowl that's been made from old farm equipment guarding the rustic tasting room.

Inside the bright, lofty barn-turned-tasting room, a redwood tasting bar takes center stage. Cozy couches and a hand-woven rug face a well-used sandstone fireplace; local artwork decorates the shop selling homemade preserves, salsas and mustards. But it's the promise of a glass of wine that has drawn us here today. Maybe the sauvignon blanc, with its apricot aroma? Or perhaps the riesling, with its hint of sweet peach and fig?

No, this isn't [Napa](#) or a wine section of [France](#). This is the Palisade region of [Colorado](#), a dry, sunny area on the Western Slope, and the winemaking hub of Colorado's fledgling viticultural industry. In recent years, the vineyards here have produced award-winning varieties and blends, making Colorado a rising star in the wine-making universe. More important, it's given active travelers yet another reason to visit this outdoorsy state, a place where you can push yourself to the physical limit by day, and then relax with a good meal (and an even better glass of wine) at night.

Surrounded by the Book Cliffs mountain range and Grand Mesa, said to be the world's largest flat-top mountain, Palisade's mapped wine trail explores the area's local flavors and showcases its reputation as a pristine cycling playground. Although the elevation is high, the terrain is mostly flat with some moderate hills in the orchard area, and with quaint country roads wending past scores of working vineyards and fruit farms buzzing with activity. The paved route crisscrosses the Colorado River, which offers cool breezes and lovely views, and connects well marked, cycling-friendly tasting rooms and wineries that are never a few miles out of pedaling range.

Having recently tasted a sturdy Colorado syrah that I would have guessed was from the Rhône Valley in France, I was intrigued by the idea of checking out the area. Joined by a friend, who is also a cycling enthusiast, we spent three days spinning and sipping through Palisade wine country this summer. Riding 15 to 20 miles a day, we stayed at B&B's, picnicked in fragrant orchards full of fuzzy peaches, dangling cherries and golden apricots, and savored hometown cooking and local wines along the way.

Similar to the weather in coastal [California](#) and the Rhône Valley, the long, hot Colorado days allow grapes to ripen with ideal sugar levels while cool nights create terrific acidity, both essential elements for quality

wine.

“The riesling and cabernet franc could be the varietals that put Colorado on the map,” said Jenne Baldwin-Eaton, head winemaker at Plum Creek Winery, whose wines have won several awards, including gold at the prestigious San Francisco International Wine Competition in 2004. As we strolled through the chilly wine storage room, stacked with aisles of [Minnesota](#) and French oak snub-nosed barrels filled with [chardonnay](#), sangiovese and [cabernet sauvignon](#) reserve, a hint of sweetness filled the air. She pointed out the glassed observation room, which is a nifty way for visitors to check out the winemaking action, as we headed toward the small laboratory where wine and soil conditions are tested. “We are still in the infant stage of our industry and we are learning what works by researching and trying new things,” she said.

Colorado grapes grow in unusually high elevation, between 4,000 and 7,000 feet, among the highest vineyards in the world. The desert dryness keeps pests away, limiting use of pesticides. “Although we have been producing wines from these regions for a while, the overall quality has dramatically increased in the past five to seven years,” said Ms. Baldwin-Eaton, one of a handful of women winemakers in Colorado. “We are learning more about which grapes grow better in what areas, better trellising techniques for high-quality grapes, and we have changed how we make the wine.”

Colorado viticulture dates back to 1890 when Gov. George A. Crawford, who founded Grand Junction in 1881, planted 60 acres of grapes and other fruit on Rapid Creek, above Palisade. A quarter century later, prohibition crushed his oenophile dreams. During those sobering years (Colorado's prohibition began four years before national prohibition) vines were yanked from the mineral-rich soil and replaced with apple, cherry, apricot and peach trees.

The first contemporary Colorado winery opened in 1968, but it was slow growing; by 1990, there were only four wineries. Eventually, however, the industry took root. Today there are 72 recognized Colorado wineries, according to the Colorado Wines trade group, with more on the way.

IF you're headed out on a Colorado wine-and-[biking](#) trip, the first choice is deciding which of the two federally designated wine regions to explore first. The West Elks AVA, around Paonia and Hotchkiss, parallels the north fork of the Gunnison River and includes Grand Junction, with wineries running along the western slope and Colorado River from Palisade to the flanks of Colorado National Monument, a federal area near Grand Junction.

I chose Palisade, because it is bike-friendly. A zippy 12-mile drive east of Grand Junction airport on Interstate 70 leads to Palisade, which calls itself the “The Peach and Wine Capital of Colorado.” Palisade harbors nearly 75 percent of the state's vineyards. Its temperate climate combined with the winds blowing through the surrounding DeBeque Canyon generate ideal growing conditions.

Of the 21 Palisade wineries and vineyards, 19 have tasting rooms. Most wineries offer free tastings and tours of their vineyards and production facilities, as do orchards accessible via the wine trail. Self-guided bike tours are a snap, using the handy color-coded wine and orchard map. With map in pocket, thirsty cyclists can follow bright blue “Colorado Wine Trails” signs marking the way. The region is conveniently designed on a grid, with east-west roads named with numbers correlating to mileage from the [Utah](#) border and north-south roads noted with letters. While some wineries reside on the outskirts of town in East Mesa

Orchard, in farm country, most lie within town borders.

On our second day of the trip, the first being spent getting a feel for the area and the various vineyards, we started out in the East Mesa Orchard, a rolling farmland area on the outskirts of town, peppered with fruit farms and vineyards, sandwiched between the towering Book Cliffs and sprawling Grand Mesa.

The cool mountain air warmed as the sun peeked over the massive caramel Book Cliffs, which appeared chocolate brown in the morning shadow. The range seemed to follow us as we pedaled weather-worn gray roads past bushy cottonwood trees, pastel wildflowers and fruit farms. Sweet stone fruit aromas lingered and the clear cobalt sky promised a beautiful day ahead. We zigzagged undulating one-lane country roads, passing an occasional sluggish tractor humming between farms or an unhurried car. (Although infrequent, some hills require rigorous biking, but the view of the sprawling Grand Valley is well worth the effort.)

About 15 minutes into our ride, we spotted High Country Orchards in the distance. A tidy checkerboard of neatly aligned peach trees — 19,200 in all I was later told — was clustered along the glistening Colorado River, with the Book Cliffs as backdrop.

Ten minutes later, we rolled through the log fence entrance and leaned our bikes against the High Country store, where we were greeted by the owners, Scott and Theresa High. Veterans of the wine import business in [Denver](#), Mr. and Mrs. High bought their first 10-acre orchard in 1999, intending to rip out the nearly 3,200 old Topaz and Elberta peach trees after harvest and replant the land with grapevines. “But when those first peaches were ripe, we stood among the row of trees tasting the peaches with sweet juice running down our chins,” recalled Mr. High, clad in jeans, work boots and blue-collared short-sleeve shirt with the High Country Orchards logo over the left pocket. “We couldn’t bear tearing out the orchard, and it became clear the vineyard would have to wait.”

Since there were just two of us, we took [golf](#) carts, rather than the trolley that is used for larger groups, to explore the peach orchard buzzing with busy workers pruning and plucking unripe fruit from fluttering branches. By what could have been the 18th hole, I was in peach overload and overwhelmed by the staggering size of the estate. Before leaving, we stopped into the country store to peek at the jams and fruit salsas made from unsold fruit, before heading to our first winery of the day.

A mile or so down the road from High Country is Carlson Vineyards. “If you think you’ve gone too far, keep going” are the directions. On the way, keep an eye out for Lyle Nichols, whose front yard is teeming with whimsical sculptures constructed from miscellaneous materials. Mr. Nichols is the artist behind the Plum Creek Cellars’ sculpture “Chardonnay Chicken.”

Parker and Mary Carlson, who opened Carlson Vineyards in 1988, show similar humor with their semisweet wines, named Prairie Dog Blush, Cougar Run Shiraz and Tyrannosaurus Red — made from the German lemlberger grape. But it is their riesling that has become renowned — it was a double gold winner at the 2004 International Eastern Wine Competition.

Carlson also specializes in fruit wine, common in the region, made from cherries, peaches and plums plucked from the farm. The award-winning cherry wine, made with Colorado-grown Montmorency pie cherries, is a walloping sweet-tart treat. It’s great on its own, but even better the Carlson way. They dip the

glass rim into locally made Enstrom's dark chocolate, warming behind the bar, before pouring the wine.

By 1:30, we were hungry and ready for a break. Lunch takes a bit of planning. The Palisade Café and Palisade Brewery are among the few sit-down options in town, but there are plenty of country stores and farm stands along the way to pick up snacks if you want to have a picnic at any number of the wineries.

We stopped at Z's Orchard for a little lunch R&R: refueling and relaxing. Enjoying the cool breeze and puffy clouds masking the blazing sun, we sat at a wooden picnic table set in the heart of a shady orchard peppered with leafy peach, cherry and apricot trees and veggies sprouting from the ground. We ate a salad made from locally grown lettuce, radishes, basil and [tomatoes](#), and sipped quenching iced tea from a sweaty glass, while chatting with the orchard owner, Carol Zadronzy, a retired school teacher who started Z's with her family 38 years ago.

AS the day began to wind down, we ended up at Garfield Estates, which has its own terrific picnic area in the backyard facing the Book Cliffs mountain range — including Mount Garfield, for which the vineyard is named. Garfield Estates was founded in 2000 by two self-described “software technos,” Jeff Carr and Dave McLoughlin. When Mr. McLoughlin left the winery earlier this year, Brad Harmon, also a former tech-guy, became a partner and assistant winemaker.

We followed Mr. Harmon through the small barrel room, the size of a three-car garage, and up the plank stairs to the quaint tasting room, formerly a hayloft, adorned with prize ribbons, vineyard pictures and wine gadgets, to start our tasting. “This was one of our first successes,” said Mr. Harmon, pouring us a taste of the S2, a *sémillon* and *viognier* blend, which has become Garfield's signature table white. Next was the *vin rosé*, a meld of *syrah* and [merlot](#), which we decided was the perfect picnic partner because of its light body sprinkled with pepper and spice.

Once I had sampled a few reds, I was ready to relax in the pastoral backyard picnic area, taking with me a glass of the 2007 *fumé blanc*. Crisp and clean with bright acidity and subtle stone fruit, the '07 *fumé blanc* was one of the gems crafted by the head winemaker, Rainer Thoma, who grew up working on his family's vineyard in Koenigheim, [Germany](#), and brought his Old World winemaking style to the American West. “Rainer has changed the way we're making wine and we just keep learning and improving,” Mr. Harmon said, pausing a moment to survey his 11-acre estate. “Last year's *fumé blanc* stayed in the barrel too long, making it thick and oakly,” he said, “but this year we cut the time and got this great liveliness.”

After a long day of biking and tasting, we returned to A DiVine Thyme B&B in the town of Palisade for a little R&R — and late afternoon *hors d'oeuvres* prepared by our host: *bruschetta*, fresh berries and a shrimp salad made with avocado and mango. Near Main Street, Cathy and Tom Monroe's Victorian home is elegant, with inviting couches and fireplace in the living room and intimate high tables for dining. Mrs. Monroe's breakfasts, using fresh produce and herbs, are nearly too beautiful to eat. (But I did anyway.)

Dinner options here are limited, but good. There are two places in town serving upscale meals: Red Rose Café, with an eclectic Vietnamese and Italian menu, reflecting the owners' heritages, and Inari's, which opened in 2007.

The owners (and husband and wife) Meg Albers and Hiro Izumi use locally grown ingredients to create

wickedly wonderful dishes. The signature tuna stack appetizer — sushi-quality ahi layered with spring greens, fresh mango, avocado and wasabi vinaigrette — was a knockout. The menu also features a zesty cioppino, Southern fried rabbit, and Colorado leg of lamb braised for nine hours.

As I sat on the porch of our B&B after dinner, sipping Plum Creek cabernet franc while admiring the starry sky, I recalled what Ms. Baldwin-Eaton had said earlier in the day. “I feel like we’re pioneering uncharted territory, but we’re recognizing how fragile our fruit is and how it needs to be delicately handled for full expression. One day people won’t be shocked we’re making great wine in Colorado.”

IF YOU GO

THE WINERIES

A map of the local wine trail is available at the Palisade Chamber of Commerce and most Palisade wineries.

Canyon Wind Cellars. This is one of the most notable wineries in [Colorado](#), whose owner, Norman Christianson — a trained geologist who works with Bob Pepi, the noted [Napa](#) winemaker-turned-consultant — has turned 33 acres of fruit trees into vineyards and has 20 more acres ready for planting. Tasting room open daily 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; 3907 North River Road, Palisade; (970) 464-0888; www.canyonwindcellars.com.

Carlson Vineyards. Open daily 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; 461 35 Road, Palisade; (888) 464-5554; www.carlsonvineyards.com.

Colorado Cellars Winery. Open weekdays 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday 10 to 5; 3553 E Road, Palisade; (970) 464-7921; www.coloradocellars.com.

DeBeque Canyon Winery. Open daily 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; 3943 Highway 6, Palisade; (970) 464-0550; www.debequecanyonwinery.com.

Garfield Estates Vineyard & Winery. Open daily 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; 3572 G Road, Palisade; (970) 464-0941; www.garfieldestates.com.

Grande River Vineyards. The site of the Heard It Through the Grapevine Summer Concert Series (2009 schedule not available yet), held on the grounds with plenty of room for picnickers. Wine sold by the bottle or the glass. Gates open at 6:30 p.m., shows start at 7:30 p.m., rain or shine. Tasting room open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; 787 Elberta Avenue, Palisade; (800) 264-7696; www.grandriverwines.com

Graystone Winery. Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday 11 to 6 (5 in winter all days); 3352 F Road, Clifton; (970) 434-8610; www.graystonewine.com.

Plum Creek Winery. Open daily 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., April through October; 10 to 5, November through March. Tours on Saturday or by appointment; picnic area; 3708 G Road, Palisade; (970) 464-7586; www.plumcreekwinery.com.

St. Kathryn Cellars. Open daily 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; 785 Elberta, Palisade; (970) 464-9288; www.st-kathryn-cellars.com.

THE ORCHARDS

Alida's Fruits sells locally grown peaches, cherries and apricots, as well chocolate-dipped dried fruit, canned fruit, jams and sauces, in its country store in East Orchard Mesa; 3402 C ½ Road, Palisade; (970) 434-8769; www.alidasfruits.com.

High Country Orchards sells peaches, plums, apricots and cherries, as well jalapeño peach and amaretto preserves. Country store open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday; tours by appointment; 3548 E ½ Road, Palisade; (970) 464-1150; www.highcountryorchards.com.

Z's Orchards is a 30-year-old orchard run by Carol Zadrozny and her family, producing sweet, juicy cherries, apricots, raspberries and peaches. Tours available Monday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. 315 33 ¾ Road, Palisade; (970) 434-6267; www.zsorchard.com.

WHERE TO STAY

The Two Rivers Winery & Chateau is an upscale inn designed as a French country chateau with its own winery, situated in Grand Junction. Ten guest rooms, outdoor pavilion and sprawling grounds surrounded by Colorado National Monument, Book Cliffs mountain range and Grand Mesa. Rates are \$79 to \$145 a night. 2087 Broadway, Grand Junction; (866) 312-9463; www.tworiverswinery.com.

Wine Country Inn, which opened in August, calls itself Palisade's first wine-focused hotel, with house wines coming from the Grand River Winery. Eighty rooms, \$149 to \$285; \$89 to \$211 from November through February. 777 Grand River Drive, Palisade; (888) 855-8330; www.coloradowinecountryinn.com.

A DiVine Thyme B&B is an elegant Victorian bed-and-breakfast, a few blocks from downtown. Three rooms, \$99 to \$139 a night. 404 West First Street, Palisade; (970) 464-9144; www.adivinethymebandb.com.

Dreamcatcher Bed-and-Breakfast is in East Orchard Mesa, just outside of town. Terrific baked goods accompany a hearty breakfast. Four rooms, \$70 to \$175 a night. 3694 F Road, Palisade; (970) 464-9900; www.dreamcatcher-b-and-b.com.

WHERE TO EAT

Inari's features an eclectic menu with selections that may include cioppino, Southern fried rabbit and a Colorado leg of lamb braised for nine hours. Patio seating; 336 Main Street, Palisade; (970) 464-4911; www.inarisbistro.com.

Red Rose Café has an eclectic Vietnamese, American and Italian-inspired menu, featuring seafood, pasta and beef. The affordable wine list is entirely local; 235 Main Street, Palisade; (970) 464-7673; www.theredrosecafe.com.

Palisade Cafe, a breakfast and lunch nook in the middle of town, uses local produce when possible for their omelets, pancakes and French toast. Lunch specials include homemade soup and assorted sandwiches, burgers, and salads; 113 West Third Street, Palisade; (970) 464-0657.

RENTING BIKES

Bike rentals are available from Rapid Creek Cycles & Sport in downtown Palisade, which offers three-speed cruising bikes (\$35 a day; baskets and racks available) and mountain bikes (\$45 to \$55 a day); 317 South Main Street, Palisade; (970) 464-9266; www.rapidcreekcycles.com.

Those too pooped to pedal can take a driving wine tour with American Spirit Shuttle, 204 Fourth Street, in Clifton, (970) 523-7662, and other local operators.

STEFANI JACKENTHAL is a New York-based journalist who frequently writes about wine.

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