

# A Tiny Colorado



WINE REPORT

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A TINY COLORADO WINE REPORT



# GOOD VITIS

FALL/WINTER 2024

— EDITED BY JEFFREY M. COHEN —

— PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFREY M. COHEN —





# A Tiny Colorado Wine Report

## From the Fall/Winter 2024 *Good Vitis* Issue

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# LETTER FROM



## THE GOOD VITIS EDITOR

### GOOD VITIS EDITOR

Readers, This holiday season has been a plethora of good wine for us at Good Vitis, and I hope it's been the same for you. We dug into our cellar and pulled out a few cases of the good stuff, and that wine along with most of what's written about in this issue was enjoyed by family. I love sharing good wine with good people, and I got to do that a lot recently.

Writing about all this good wine put me in touch with a lot of good people as well, and that's part of what makes writing *Good Vitis* so rewarding. Wine is as much about the people that make and sell it as it is about the terroir that helps define it. I hope reading about them and their wares will inspire you to meet them and their wines.

I've been thinking a lot about how I might want to change my approach to enjoying wine in 2025. One resolution I've made is to be more purposeful about the wine I buy. I've opened many wines in 2024 that I took flyers on over the last decade, and I've not always enjoyed them as much as the wines I know I like. 2024, and some of the wine covered in this article, are helping me focus in 2025. I hope they help you focus as well. Best, Aaron Menenberg.







Previous page: The view from a Sauvage Spectrum vineyard.

## Heading West For Wine

One of the very best things about the last year and half of moving around America's western states has been the discovery of wine in Utah and Colorado, and further exploration of Arizona wine. I wrote a report about the Utah experience, which remains tantalizingly vivid in my mind and on my palate. Part of what I love so much about Utah wine is the desert minerality it shares with Arizona, which I have found nowhere else in the world. Both states' wines smell like the red sand, rocks, and mountains that make these states so beautiful and mesmerizing. And, they taste like what I imagine licking that sand, rock, and mountains tastes like. I love desert wine.

Colorado's Grand Valley AVA is the heart of Colorado's wine scene, at least from vineyard and concentration of wineries perspectives. The commercial center is the town of Palisade, which is about 11 miles east of Grand Junction. Palisade sits at the bottom of beautifully marbled white rock mountains, their cliff faces presenting a stark contrast to the green Rocky Mountains from which they emerge and the semi-arid desert that expands westward from them.

I will admit to expecting desert minerality when I tried my first batch of Grand Valley wines, but I quickly found that while Grand Valley's rocky terrain and desert may suggest similarities to Utah and Arizona, they are largely unrealized in the respective geologies and therefore in the wines. Instead, I found something different, something I'm still trying to understand. My more limited experience with Colorado's nascent wine scene does suggest, however, that it shares some industry dynamics with those other states, namely that the market for its products is underdeveloped even within the state and that the industry itself is fueled by a pioneering spirit. This is a very tiny report on Colorado, specifically Grand Valley, wine. I hope to spend more time exploring the scene and later write a deeper report on it.



## A Colorado Wine Ambassador

When we spent a week in Grand Junction in 2022, I decided to make one quick visit to one winery chosen, basically, and random. After 10 minutes on Instagram, I chose Sauvage Spectrum and made the 25 minute drive to their winery in Palisade. Sauvage was my choice because it looked both fun and serious, offering a range of pet nats as well as a variety of red, white, and rosé made from a range of *vinifera* and other types of grapes. I hoped that with a big portfolio, there would be at least a few to enjoy.

I showed up and asked for a standard tasting, trying, if I recall correctly, about eight wines. I liked one of the pet nats, a rosé sparkler, and the roussanne enough to write a quick Try This Wine about them. This put me in touch with the winery's co-owner and winemaker, Patric Matysiewski, with whom I quickly developed rapport and almost as quickly realized was one of the most active leaders in the Colorado wine scene.

Patric came from beer making, and after a stint at Colorado legend Infinite Monkey Theorem (a urban Denver winery sourcing grapes from the Grand Valley and elsewhere that recently announced it will be shutting down at the end of 2024) decided with his wife to move to Palisade and start a winery. He partnered with one of Colorado's most experience vineyard professional, Kailab Sauvage, who manages over 60 acres of vineyards consisting of dozens of varieties, and launched Sauvage Spectrum.

A year or so after my first visit, we were passing through Grand Junction and I decided, about 3 hours out, to make a quick pit stop at Sauvage. I texted Patric to see if he was going to be around, and we spent about 30 minutes catching up over barrel and tank samples. Then, after deciding we were going to spend the summer this year (2024) in Denver, I asked Patric for a few Palisade winery recommendations and made a 36 hour visit to the area. Finally, in my third "visit" to Palisade, I would try Colorado wine not made by Patric.





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Previous page: Patrik Matysiewski retrieving a barrel sample.

## Sauvage Spectrum

Before I get to those other wines, let me meditate for a few paragraphs on Sauvage Spectrum, which is my favorite Colorado winery even though they do not make my favorite Colorado wine. The reason is simple: Patric and Kailab are a driving force in the evolution of Colorado wine that will elevate its ability to make, in a good vintage from a great vineyard, top-tier American wine. This is because they're sacrificing things like consistency and common sense now to throw an Old Spaghetti Factory's worth of spaghetti at the wall, grape variety-wise and winemaking technique-wise, to see what will turn out the best expression of Colorado wine.

To say the approach is kind of wild is accurate. Each of the three summers I've visited provided unexpected answers to 'how is Patric experimenting this year?' I've probably tried over three dozen Sauvage wines including less common things like unorthodox red-white co-ferments; a large range of varieties from chardonnay to viognier to gamay to malbec to Teroldego to petit verdot; and some wild blends like a 1% aromella/16% grüner veltliner/32% vignobles/51% Villard blanc still white wine and a 70% aromella/20% riesling/10% vignobles pet-nat.

But to think this spaghetti wall approach isn't well conceived is inaccurate. While each visit has produced winners and losers, this summer's tasting showed impressive progress with the viognier and roussanne blend called Heritage White and single variety bottled malbec (keep pulling that oak back, my guy). I also tried a few new and very enjoyable wines like the 2021 dry white zinfandel and the 2022 Teroldego that suggests a high ceiling for the variety in the Grand Valley. He then sent me home with a killer white blend sold in 12 ounce green glass bottles consisting of 40.5% albariño/37.1% grüner veltliner/11.5% pinot gris/10.9% chenin blanc.



Farming this many varieties and taking so many fliers in the winery are emblematic of Patric and Kailab's passionate pursuit of finding Colorado's voice in wine. Following Sauvage Spectrum requires one to embrace the ride and appreciate that there will be winners and losers; some wines you'll see again, and others that you won't (even if you might like them). It is certainly not for everyone, but even if you never try Sauvage Spectrum, if you try other wine from the Grand Valley AVA, you are benefiting for the outsized risk they take to advance the industry's knowledge.

## **Blue Beryl**

Not far from Sauvage is Blue Beryl, whose website describes it as a "sunshine-filled estate vineyard and winery ran by an ambitious mother-daughter duo." I didn't know much about Blue Beryl when I arrived other than they make chenin blanc and that I was going to meet with winemaker Courtney Kiel (who is the daughter part of the duo). By the time I left, I had learned more about how the Grand Valley AVA grew into what it is today and Courtney and her mother's place in that history.

To begin with, I learned that before prohibition, much of what is today's Grand Valley AVA was planted to vineyards. With the outlawing of alcohol, the vineyards were replaced with peaches, apples, cherries, and plums (many of which still thrive today). Courtney told me that in 1974, "Old Man Bennet" Price of the now-closed DeBeque Canyon Winery was the first to bring wine grape vines back to the area. Bennett was a participant in a federal program in the 1970s to study wine grape growing feasibility in the Four Corners, and planted a lot of 3- to 5- acre plots under the program. Many of Grand Valley's vineyards today can be traced back to Bennett's efforts.

One of the vineyards not attributable to Bennett, however, is Blue Beryl's. Courtney comes from a multigenerational motorsport retail family that has been settled in the area for quite some time. About 18 years ago, her mother decided to plant a vineyard as a side project, and hired Palisade's Hermosa







Previous Page: Blue Beryl's tasting room.

Vineyards owner and winemaker Ken Dunn to plant and manage it.

The deal, Courtney told me, "was that the grapes would go to Ken." At first, they planted chenin blanc, malbec, and cabernet sauvignon. But later, they added cabernet franc, petit verdot, and syrah, and eventually there were more grapes than Ken needed leaving the family with a conundrum.

Meanwhile, Courtney was off at college in Fort Collins studying art. "It's a beer town," Courtney told me, "and I was really into beer." In a somewhat cruel twist of fate, Courtney discovered she had celiac disease, "so I had to find something other than beer." After graduating college, Courtney moved back to her beloved hometown without a plan for how to use her art degree. You can see where things are headed.

Courtney was interested in wine and interned for Ken Dunn, helping to make Hermosa wine using fruit from his vineyards and her family's. Ken told me that Courtney, like her parents, is an incredibly hard worker and humble student. "It was only a matter of time before she started making great wine of her own," he said while pouring his wine for me later that afternoon. The first wine she made under the Blue Beryl label was a 2019 malbec. Courtney has paired her passion for wine with her love of art, specifically oil painting. Not only does she make a bottle's contents, but she paints its label as well, articulating the wine's personality through a human portrait. And what's more, the winery's handsome tasting room has clearly benefited from not only Courtney's oil paintings that adorn its walls, but her broader aesthetic talent as well.

All Blue Beryl's wines come from its 12 acres of estate fruit, which is set to grow to 15 acres in the coming years. We began the tasting with the 2023 chenin blanc, which Courtney said is Palisade's first (presumably post-prohibition) planting of chenin. It is aged in stainless, and offers good







Previous Page: Blue Beryl's estate vineyard.

medium-plus weight with a slightly creamy mouthfeel dominated by yellow and green fruit flavors that float on long, linear acid. She also gave me a pour of the 2022 barrel aged chenin blanc, which rested half in new French and half in used French oak. It is unsurprisingly more plush and broad than the standard chenin, and offers stone fruit and vanilla notes on top of green apple minerality. Chenin is one of those grapes that is especially talented at showing its environs, and these are wines I enjoyed enough to want to follow to get a better sense of Blue Beryl, and Palisade's, natural *terroir*.

I also enjoyed the 2022 cabernet sauvignon, which showed a lot of varietal typicity. I found Courtney's restrained use of oak impressive given many young American winemaker's penchant for heavily oaking their wines early on, especially in nascent wine regions. The medium weight of this one really jumps out of the glass on bright acid and pure fruit notes. I think it would be particularly good with food. While I tasted the 2023 malbec rosé, 2022 malbec and cabernet francs, and a fortified raspberry wine, it's the chenin and cabernet sauvignon that I recommend most.

Blue Beryl is a young project guided by a young winemaker, and has a lot going for it. It is focused exclusively on a relatively small but seemingly thoughtfully managed vineyard with good vine age. Courtney's family's long ties (she is fourth generation) to the area firmly underpin her commitment to the project, and Blue Beryl is a tasting room that should make any visitor's list.

## **Hermosa Vineyards**

Going from Blue Beryl to Hermosa was like, and literally so, going from student to a master. After Old Man Bennet (re-)established Colorado wine in the 70s, Ken Dunn, Colorado Wine Journal's 2024 Winemaker of the Year, took it to the next level. Ken started making wine in Durango, Colorado, as a





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kid helping his neighbor who bought fruit from California. Eventually Ken moved to Palisade to “raise my kids, I wanted them to grow up on a farm.” With Ken’s decades of experience in Palisade, his wines demonstrate not just a mastery of viticulture, but decades of honed experience creating wines of place and intrigue as well.

As you pull into the parking lot, Ken hits the garage door opener and the entrance of the tasting room opens for you. Inside is a small but well-designed western themed space that, unlike some newer wineries, speaks to Colorado’s heritage in authentic ways. I bellied up the bar next to one of Ken’s regulars, and the three of us had a great conversation as Ken poured some of his core wines.

Before I got my first sip, however, Ken was running through Colorado’s *vitis bona fides*. “We get 8 inches of rain per year (a good thing)], and we have the oldest water rights along the Colorado River. 303 days of sunshine [per year]. [We’re at] 5000 feet of elevation, so we get a lot of solar radiation. This increases phenolics and skin color, and [if anything] we have to manage the alcohol [to keep it from getting too high].” The high desert also means significant diurnal shifts. In short: great growing conditions for wines of depth.

Specific to Hermosa, “thirty years ago we had 17 [grape] varieties. Now, I’m knocking that down.” The farm, then producing apples, was purchased in 1993. A year later, 15 varieties of sweet cherries and 17 varieties of grapes were planted. The winery was built in 1997. A second vineyard site was planted in 2006. Ken is particularly enthralled with his cabernet franc, which he continues to hone as he replanted 300 vines last year (“we’ll make the best cabernet franc in the world”), and his merlot (“they both disappear” off the shelves). His farming is “as close to organic as possible,” choosing to use Roundup “near” but not on the vineyards: “finding the happy medium with the bugs is the goal,” Ken said. Talking about challenges, Ken told me that they get “dead of winter, and sometimes late spring, freezes, and labor







Previous page: Ken Dunn working his tasting room at Hermosa Vineyards.

shortages.”

Ken’s wines show a maturity not readily found in the Grand Valley. “You gotta do your research, and that never stops,” he told me. He tries to hold bottles for as long as possible before releasing them. The current red release when I was there in August of 2024 was the 2018 vintage.

We started with the malbec, which is not my favorite variety but, like chenin blanc, is especially talented at showing its natural *terroir*. This one showed beautiful subtle fruit, pepper, spice, and soil. The nose smelled unlike anything I’d experienced on a wine of its age: a ripeness that “primary” understates. The cabernet sauvignon showed a lot of varietal typicity and had a beautiful tannin structure accentuated with bright acid. The Signature Red is a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, and malbec that are independently aged for one year in new French oak and then blended and aged together for another year. It has a very compete flavor profile that layers red and black fruit with smoky pepper, garrigue, and florals. My favorite was the syrah, which follows the slightly feral profile that I love. It’s a little salty, a little plummy, and features salmon jerky and soy sauce along with dark fruit. I also tried the cherry dessert wine made from 100% cherries fortified with 18-year old cherry brandy that Ken makes. It’s downright delicious and will increasingly be made with cherries from Utah as they get replaced in Colorado with other crops.

In addition to the wines covered above Ken makes cabernet franc, chardonnay, chenin blanc, gewurztraminer, merlot, orange muscat, rkatsiteli, sauvignon blanc, semillon, and viognier. Most of these are small production and available only through the tasting room (and not for long). This, along with what may be Colorado’s best wines at the moment, make Hermosa a must stop for those visiting the area.



# HUMBLE WINE FOR THE CURIOUS MIND





Previous page: Inside Ordinary Fellow's tasting room.

## **Ordinary Fellow**

My final stop was an unplanned fly-by at Ordinary Fellow where I did a basic tasting flight on my own. Founded by Brit Ben Parsons and named after a famous old English pub, the winery produces wine from grapes sourced from Colorado and Utah. While still living in Britain, Ben decided he wanted to make wine and found a job posting in Palisade, of all places. He made the leap, moving across the Atlantic. After a few years in Palisade, he partnered to open the Infinite Monkey Theorem in Denver before eventually launching Ordinary Fellow. The tasting room sits in the historic United Fruit Growers Co-Op and is great venue for enjoying the wine.

I chose to taste the 2022 riesling, chardonnay, blanc de noir, and cabernet sauvignon, all made from Colorado grapes, and the 2023 Utah Rosé field blend. I found all to be well made, and especially enjoyed that desert minerality in the Utah Rosé. One theme among all the wines, even including the cabernet sauvignon, is a ripping acidity; these are made for acid heads. Those that enjoy plush, smooth mouthfeels may not love the offerings. The cabernet sauvignon, like those offered at Blue Beryl and Hermosa, showed a lot of varietal typicity on the nose. This is one strand I'd love to pull on when I visit the area next. That said, the palate is very different (and intriguing in its own way) in that it is a lighter, redder style than the standard American cabernet profile.

## **Eating At Cruise Control**

The struggle that goes into Sauvage Spectrum has been successful enough to keep things going and growing, both for the winery and for Patric and his partner Taryn Brooks. In Sauvage's first few years, Taryn ran operations while Patric and Kailab made the juice. However, Taryn's heart was pushing her towards opening a restaurant, and this year she opened Cruise Control







Previous page: Inside Cruise Control.

## Kitchen + Cellar in Grand Junction.

The vision for Cruise Control is to make it not just a place where people eat and drink, but to use it to create a community in Grand Junction for locals and visitors interested in stepping outside the area's more standard offerings. With room for small and large groups, different types of seating areas, space for live music, and a wine retail section featuring local and international wine, Cruise Control's large, open, and bright space is welcoming for all (including children, who have their own menu).

The menu executes the restaurant's vision of "the convergence of The Windy City and The Million Dollar Breeze," references to Chicago and Palisade. Menu items include Italian Beefs, classic Chicago hot dogs, sausages, green chili cheese balls, empanadas, hatch green chili, and charcuterie boards among other things. My dinner there was fantastic. The Chicago dog included exactly what it should, and tasted great. The Caprese salad, served in a bowl, was great. I loved the green chili cheese ball, and the yet-to-be-released chicken wings are something I hope makes it to prime time. I've only spent a few weeks in Grand Junction, but Cruise Control seems like a nice addition to the city and provides some needed variety and fun to the food scene.

## Where Is Coloradan Wine Going?

It's hard to say from my limited experience, but in Sauvage Spectrum, Blue Beryl, and Ordinary Fellow there are strong examples of young wine professionals experimenting with a wide range of grapes and styles. And in Hermosa, there is an example of how an accumulation of experience can pay off. While a small sample, it's not bad as microcosm if it's an accurate one at scale.







Previous pages: Inside Cruise Control and the restaurant's Chicago Dog.

As a wine destination the Grand Valley is a pretty good one. Despite its remoteness, or likely because of it, Grand Junction is relatively easy to get to by plane. Driving there from Denver affords the opportunity to experience one of the country's more beautiful interstate routes, while driving in from the west takes you through some stark and eerie moon-like landscapes (you can drive up from southeastern Colorado pretty easily as well). The wineries are relatively close to each other, making logistics easy once you arrive.

Regardless of how you get there, once there you've got the very cute town of Palisade and the larger Grand Junction, which means a nice range of hotels and Airbnbs and a more than adequate range of dining options. You're close to the beautiful Colorado National Monument National Park as well as a few other state and national parks, which offer a nice range of beautiful drives, hikes, and mountain biking.

Backstopping the appeal of the area as a wine destination is a strong local appetite that, unfortunately, hasn't yet stretched across the Rockies to the state's largest market in Denver. While many Palisade wineries survive on local patronage and tourism, growing awareness and appreciation for local wine in Denver is likely to be key to the industry really taking off. Denver's culinary scene is strong as is its alcohol scene, so there is opportunity for smart marketing-minded wineries.

The major impediment I see at this stage is the absence of a cogent brand identity for Colorado, or Grand Valley more specifically, wine. That's not a knock as the industry is both old and big enough to make getting there a more challenging feat than it is, say, for Utah's five wineries: because Utah wine is small and young, they can do a lot of coordination (and they are). Colorado seems a bit more like Arizona in that it's been around for perhaps longer than most people might expect, and is on its second (or third) generation of winemakers working vineyards that have been part of a fifty



year period of sustained and growing viticulture. Even the well-established Washington wine industry still lacks a standard brand identity with the state's wineries producing cabernet sauvignon and syrah of sufficiently high quality and scale that they remain in competition for the state's signature variety.

Whether Colorado's wine scene will grow and improve is something I can't say, although I am pulling for it. The level of professionalism is there to make wine that can compete on the national stage. There just needs to be a lot more of it, but then that sets up the painfully classic chicken-or-egg problem: to produce better and more wine, there needs to be the customer base, but to build the customer base you have to deliver a lot more winning wine. I doubt Colorado will proliferate like West Coast wine, but it can certainly be something that people of all palates seek out. I know I will.







