

# Get on Board with Verde Canyon Railroad

Written by Story by David M. Brown

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Cabs to cabooses: We've got your ticket this month and next.



To celebrate women this month, and prepare for Valentine's Day in February, we're riding the spectacular Verde Canyon Railroad, an Arizona entertainment treasure, and enjoying some fine wine, and chocolates, on the way.

From the depot in Clarkdale, about an hour and a half north of the Valley, the scenic train runs year-round through the sublime Verde Canyon, offering riders eons of geology, red rock cliffs like those of nearby world-destination Sedona, Native American ruins, classic railroad trestles, a 680-foot man-made tunnel and a riparian habitat, where eagles make their nests and hunt.

Since 1990, more than one million passengers have enjoyed the four-hour roundtrip journey on the standard-gauge railroad, which includes vintage FP7 diesel locomotives, eight first-class cars, two coach-class cars, six open-air viewing cars and a private caboose.

Last February, the original Verde Valley Railway celebrated its 100th anniversary. The tracks once transported millions of dollars of copper from the area to Drake, where the ore was shipped along the Santa Fe to other areas of the country. After the mines closed in 1953, the line became the "Verde Mix" because of the blend of freight, livestock and passengers. Owner Dave Durbano purchased the line in 1988 and transformed it into one of the Southwest's great scenic railroads.

Throughout the year, the railroad schedules special events. For Valentine's Day, the Chocolate Lovers' Festival, Feb. 12 through 17, features platters of desserts, chocolate fountains and specialty drinks in select first-class cars. "If the weather is chilly, our passengers snuggle on a love seat and watch nature's love story scroll by through the coach's panoramic windows," says Teresa Propeck, spokeswoman for the Verde Canyon Railroad.

Love story? Adding to the colors, the red rock formations and the river, high on the cliffs are nests of eagles, who monogamously mate for life. On board, rail guests enjoy wines by Weibel Family Vineyards & Winery in California. These private-label bottles can also be purchased at the Whistle Stop boutique at the depot.

Let's quaff:

2009 Chardonnay (All Aboard) — This wine is hand-crafted using a traditional cold-fermentation process in stainless steel tanks and then barrel aged in combination neutral and new oak barrels from France. This achieves a balance between neutral acidity and forward fruit characteristics.

Winemaker notes: "The 2009 chardonnay is a lovely hue of gold, with beautiful clarity and aromas of pear and vanilla custard. Medium-bodied in mouth feel, this versatile wine features flavors of white peach and a lingering finish of vanilla toast and spice."

2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Locomotive 1512) — Weibel's cabernet vineyards are in Redwood Valley, a unique viticulture area. Mendocino County has warm days like Napa Valley and Sonoma County but cooler nights, which accentuates the delicate flavor nuances in the grapes as well as promotes a refreshing crispness. The estate vineyard showcases that classic Mendocino County character superbly.

Winemaker notes: "Rich, deep garnet color with aromas of dark fruits, hints of tobacco and toast, this smooth and well-structured cab will age beautifully. Weibel Cabernet Sauvignon exhibits a rich, full, ripe style with a bounty of fruit on the palate and a long intriguing finish."

2010 Pinot Noir (Route Red) — Weibel's pinot noir vineyards in Potter Valley, in eastern Mendocino County, produce intensely flavored berries which have unique characteristics.

Winemaking focuses on conscientious methods including maintaining the elements of terroir and vigilance in barrel selection.

Winemaker notes: "It has lush, bright cherry and raspberry on the nose, followed with fresh berry-cherry flavor on the mid-palate. It finishes with nuances of rose petal and a hint of clove."

2009 Merlot (Engine Engine) — Weibel's merlot vineyards are in the southeastern Ukiah Valley-Talmage farming area—river bench land and soil consisting of sandy loam with a rocky substrate, which lends to excellent drainage.

Winemaker notes: "Known for its deep garnet color and bold plum nose, our merlot is multifaceted on the palate with elements of deep, dark fruits layered with spice and cedar. It finishes with long, unique anise, herbaceous flavors."

Private Cuvee/California Brut Sparkling Wine (Escape) — Weibel handcrafts this traditional Brut in stainless steel tanks which retain the crisp bright flavors of chardonnay and pinot noir.

Winemaker notes: "A pale straw color with absolute clarity, our estate Brut has aromatics of tropical fruit, subtle notes of banana and pineapple that grace the nose, followed by flavors of bright, crisp apple with hints of melon and pear. The enticing finish has a delightful candied apple

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impression with a hint of spice.”

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