Katherine Cole

‘Do I go to Boulder for wholesome things like farmers’ markets? Er, no. I go there to drink wine’



The scenic mountain city of Boulder, Colorado, is surrounded by steep hiking trails and bisected by a burbling creek. It boasts an abundant farmers’ market and a population of gorgeous, globally ranked cyclists and runners. But do I go to Boulder for these wholesome things? Er, no. I go there to drink wine.

Alas, in January 2027, my Boulder secret (go for the hiking, stay for the wine!) will spill out. Because, after four decades in Park City, Utah, the Sundance Film Festival will move to Boulder, bringing 85,000 dilettantes to the best little wine town in the US.

Attendees will surely notice the move away from the US’s most draconian alcohol-control state. Utah, a retail monopoly, marks up every wine 88.5% over cost, while in Colorado, retailers and restaurateurs can set their own prices.

In fact, Colorado’s most distinctive regulation arguably makes the scene richer: elsewhere in America, wine enthusiasts can pay a corkage fee and bring their own bottles to restaurants. Colorado prohibits BYOB dining, which encourages the kind of deep wine programs one sees in Europe, where corkage isn’t the norm.

I learned this from Bobby Stuckey, who, as a freshly minted Master Sommelier, left Napa Valley’s The French Laundry 22 years ago to open a fine-dining destination in Boulder focused entirely around the cuisine and wines of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in northeast Italy. ‘I remember my mentor Thomas Keller going, “Bobby, what are you doing? This is nuts,”’ Stuckey recalls.

And yet, over the decades, Stuckey and his team have hosted countless visiting winemakers, launched the Frasca Hospitality Group and spearheaded the annual Festa del Chianti Classico in Denver. Frasca acolytes have graduated to prominent posts across the US, as well as filling Boulder’s other restaurants with wine lists that call for reading glasses, an aperitif and 20 minutes of full concentration.

In an enclave with a population of just 70,000 (not counting the 38,000-odd university students), where shorts and trail shoes are standard attire, it’s astonishing that Stuckey’s flagship Frasca Food and Wine is regularly packed with diners dressed to the nines and swooning over Schioppettino.

So, who are all these high-mountain fine-wine enthusiasts? Boulder isn’t a posh ski outpost with a captive audience of high-spenders, after all. Stuckey cites the density of biopharma, aerospace and tech employers here. ‘You have all these super-well-read, educated people, and they travel,’ he points out. (My take: a numbers geek is a ready-made wine geek.)

Case in point: wine critic Jeb Dunnuck was drawn to Boulder by a job at Ball Aerospace (now part of BAE Systems). ‘Once an engineer, always an engineer,’ Dunnuck says with a grin. Using his engineering knowhow, he coded the complex database for his subscription wine business back in 2008.

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In a classic example of the wine synergy here, Dunnuck poached his senior editor from Stuckey. ‘We would have to taste like 150 wines a day,’ Dunnuck recalls. ‘I reached out to Bobby and said, “Would any of your young team members like to come support that?” and Audrey Frick came over.’

Unlike transplants Stuckey and Dunnuck, Boulder native Brett Zimmerman MS represents the city’s longer institutional memory. Local retailers Wayne Belding MS and Sally Mohr MS helped Zimmerman study for his MS exams, and in turn he took over their business when they were ready to retire.

In addition to running Boulder Wine Merchant, which offers regular producer tastings, Zimmerman founded the Boulder Burgundy Festival in 2011. Beyond the strong dining scene, he sees the alpine terrain as key to understanding the endemic culture of connoisseurship. ‘Quality of life is important to people in Boulder,’ he explains. ‘Whether it’s biking, climbing, skiing or sharing time with friends,’ the ideal accompaniment is ‘a great bottle of wine’. D

Katherine Cole is the author of five books on wine, and communications director at creative design and brand strategy agency Vin in Portland, Oregon

IN MY GLASS THIS MONTH

It’s a shame many US regions prohibit wineries from serving their own estate-grown food. Happily, Oregon’s Columbia River Gorge is rich with farm-to-table winery dining. In July, at Hiyu Wine Farm, I revelled in fava bean, mint and ricotta alongside their **Aesalon 2023**, a field blend of Spanish and Portuguese white and pink varieties. And at **Analemma**, the **Mosier Hills Syrah 2022** (US$60 Analemma Wines) simply must be consumed with the house lamb bolognese. Come for the wine, stay for the food.



PHOTOGRAPH SHE SAW THINGS