


APPELLATIONS

Paso's Promise

BY ROB COSTANTINO

Cabernet sauvignon thrives in J. Lohr's Paso Robles vineyards on the Estrella plateau on the east side of Highway 101.





Paso Robles may be America's most dynamic wine region - and its most diverse. Splendid old-vine zinfandel, ageworthy and elegant cabernet sauvignon, spicy yet supple pinot noir, and almost any white or red variety, from pinot grigio to petite syrah, are made here. World-class bottlings of viognier, roussanne, marsanne, syrah, grenache, and mourvèdre, either as beautifully integrated blends or as stand-alone varietals, proudly bear the Paso Robles name.

Central to the region's dynamism is an environment that is ideal for growing quality grapes and a core of talented producers, winemakers, and growers who have been attracted by the promise of Paso Robles.

Discovering Paso Robles

Although many wine lovers have discovered the charms of the area's wines, it remains unknown to some and few would be able to place Paso Robles ("pass of the oaks" in Spanish) on a map of California. The town is located roughly halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, and the Paso Robles American Viticultural Area (AVA), a heptagon-shaped area of more than 650,000 acres, covers much of northern San Luis Obispo County. Within this vast expanse are at least eight distinct subregions: the most important are the "Estrella Triangle" or plateau on the east side of Highway 101, the old-vine vineyards near Templeton established by Italian immigrants in the 1920s, and the Adelaida hills area near the western border of the AVA, west of the town of Paso Robles.

The region's colorful wine history began with the Spanish missionaries. In 1882 an Indian farmer named Andrew York established what is now the York Mountain Winery (since 1983 its own AVA encompassing 30 acres of high-altitude vineyards), and the famous Polish concert pianist Ignacy Paderewski planted a vineyard in the Adelaida area near the turn of the twentieth century. The region's modern wine history began in 1964 when Dr. Stanley Hoffman founded a vineyard in Adelaida planted with cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, and chardonnay under the guidance of California's leading enologist, André Tchelistcheff.

Among the visionaries who saw Paso Robles as an area of quality grape growing was Gary Eberle, who helped plant 500 acres of vines at the Estrella River Winery (now Beringer Blass's Meridian Vineyards), including the first commercial syrah planting in California. Eberle, a former Penn State football player and microbiologist who established his own winery in 1983, is among the modern pioneers who have staked their claim in Paso Robles with a passion to make great wines. Eberle's peers include rock musician and writer John Munch, who established the Adelaida Cellars label in 1981 and his own independent winery, Le Cuvier; Ken Volk, a former fruit science major and music promoter who established Wild Horse in 1983; Chuck Ortman, the leading force at Meridian Vineyards; and Jerry Lohr, a Stanford-educated, South Dakota-raised farm boy who bought vineyard land in Paso Robles when he became convinced that the Estrella plateau soils could support great cabernet sauvignon.

Climate, Soils, Diversity

With proper vineyard management, the superb Paso Robles grape growing climate yields ripe, bright, concentrated fruit with complex flavors that are balanced with good acidity. Overall, the region is a warm milieu for wine grapes, comparable to Sonoma's Alexander Valley, but during the growing season temperatures peak in the mid-afternoon and drop precipitously as cool



Pacific air is sucked through gaps in the coastal mountains—a vacuum effect caused by the heating of the much larger Central Valley east of the AVA. Diurnal temperature swings can reach 50°F, among the largest in California.

A variety of soils suited for viticulture provide the foundation that allows a vast array of different grapes varieties to flourish—more than 50 at last count. On the west side of the AVA, sea deposits and limestone rich in calcium and minerals contribute to the expression of aromatic qualities that distinguish high-quality Rhône-type wines. The east side soils, a complex mixture of low-vigor sandy loams, granitic composites, and shale, are ideal for growing cabernet sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties.

Microclimates within the vast AVA allow a surprising number of different white and red grapes to show their best. While Paso Robles has established a glowing reputation as

a red-wine region—especially for cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel, and more recently, syrah—good examples of chardonnay are made, recent vintages of Rhônes whites (viognier, marsanne, roussanne, and their blends) are turning heads, and everything from malvasia bianco to muscat have found a home.

In general, cabernet sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties, syrah, and petite syrah thrive in the soils on the Estrella plateau and other sites on the east side of Highway 101, an area whose underground aquifers allow irrigation in a zone that receives only 8 to 15 inches of rainfall annually. Zinfandel, Rhônes reds, and Rhônes whites have found a home on the west side, where winter rainfall can reach up to 50 inches in the hills close to the Pacific; paradoxically, given the rainfall, groundwater resources are limited, and a number of vineyards are dry-farmed. Chardonnay and pinot noir flourish in the Templeton area, where Pacific breezes funnel in daily through the Templeton Gap.

Regional Upswing

A natural grape-growing advantage, coupled with lower land costs than Napa and Sonoma, have made the region the fastest growing coastal area in California in the last decade. Total vineyard acreage has increased from 4,000 to 15,300 acres in the last 20 years, and the land rush continues in the new century. Mega wineries such as E&J Gallo, Beringer Blass, Robert Mondavi Winery, Washington-based Stimson Lane, and Brown-Forman's Fetzer Vineyards own vineyards and/or wineries in the region. Two of the world's foremost Rhône wine producers, Australia's giant Southcorp and the Perrin family of Châteauneuf's

WHAT ARE PASO WINES?

General Characteristics

A favorable coastal climate of dry summers, warm days, and cool nights and complex, low-vigor soils, yield wines with bright, concentrated fruit, complex aromas and flavors, and balancing acidity. East side cabernet sauvignon and petite syrah show complexity and finesse, old-vine zinfandel is rich and spicy, and west side Rhône varieties are multitextured, with complex, spicy fruit.

Aging

Most white wines and many everyday reds are ready to drink upon release. Cabernet sauvignon can age extremely well, and the best can improve for 20 years or more. (A recent tasting of Eberle 1980, 1981, and 1982 revealed a rare combination of finesse, complexity, balance, and vigor) Zinfandel drinks best within five years of release. The best Rhône reds, both varietal bottlings and blends, should age gracefully for at least ten years.

Recent Vintages

- 2001, 2000 – very good wines across the spectrum
- 1999 – excellent; concentrated, powerful wines
- 1998 – uneven; cold year with very late ripening—choose carefully
- 1997 – good whites, excellent reds

famous Château de Beaucastel bought property here, convinced that the region is a prime area for Rhône wines. Southcorp and the Niven family of Edna Valley's renowned Paragon Vineyard have established a vineyard in Creston on the east side to make Seven Peaks wines, and the first vintages have been well received. The Perrins and veteran wine importer Robert Haas (Vineyard Brands) are partners in Tablas Creek, an Adelaida hills winery established in 1982. Following a measured development of the vineyard using Château de Beaucastel clones, the Perrins, Haas, and Cellar Master Neil Collins are now reaping the rewards of their patience; the most recent vintages are complete, world-class wines.

While Eberle, Wild Horse, J. Lohr, and Meridian remain consistent leaders, others such as Justin have quickly established a reputation for high quality. Arciero and Martin Brothers have been reborn as EOS Estate Winery and Martin & Weyrich respectively, with replanted vineyards, updated winery protocols, and newfound vigor. The Arciero family, Partner/Managing Director Kerry Vix, and Director of Winemaking Steven Felten are gathering rave reviews for EOS Estate wines, and the broad range of Martin & Weyrich wines are steadily improving. On the east side of 101, the inimitable Tobin James and Lance Silver have built a loyal following at Tobin James Cellars by marketing "James Gang" fun at their popular tasting room and producing vibrant, crowd-pleasing wines. On the west side of 101, Marc Goldberg and Maggie d'Ambrosia are building a reputation for complex pinot noir at Windward Vineyard.

A new generation of winemakers with a penchant for detail and a firm understanding of vineyard management are making their imprint at established and new ventures. For example, Bill Sheffer at Eberle, Jeff Branca at Justin, Steve Glossner at Adelaida Cellars, and Austin Hope at Treana are strengthening existing reputations for quality.



Rhône-to-the-bone Mat Garretson (Garretson Wine Company), zinfandel zealots Robert Nadeau (Nadeau Family Vintners) and David Hunt (Hunt Cellars), and Lee Nesbitt (Chumeia Vineyards) have opened promising new ventures.

The allure and promise of Paso Robles have also attracted prominent wine world stars to the area. Larry Turley of Turley Wine Cellars has purchased the old-vine zinfandel specialist, Pesenti Winery, vineyard improvements have begun, and new Turley wines are being fashioned by Winemaker Ehren Jordan. Farther west, Napa's Robert Biale is clearing land on a hillside in Adelaida. Stephan

PASO ON PREMISE

"The strongest point about Paso wines is that there is no 'standard' wines that have to be made. Napa wineries feel an obligation to produce a cab and a chard; in Paso, wineries produce what they are passionate about," remarks George Miliotes, CWE and director of beverage and services networks for Darden Restaurants, Inc. in Orlando, Florida. Miliotes, who is currently building a list for Darden is especially partial to Rhône varieties and zinfandel from the Paso Robles AVA. "When I think of birds on the grill, such as quail, I think of Tablas Creek *Reserve Cuvée* red—matching rich to rich. If I am pairing tuna prepared with light Asian spices, and I want a red, a Peachy Canyon zin works for me."

Master Sommelier Greg Harrington, corporate beverage director for B. R. Guest, Inc. in New York City, lists Clos Mimi 1999 Syrah *Shell Creek Vineyard*, \$125 (Clos Mimi is a Santa Maria Valley producer that sources its Syrah from Paso Robles vineyards), Tablas Creek 2000 *Clos Blanc*, \$30 ("I like the reds, but loves the whites"), and Kunin 1999 Zinfandel *French Camp Vineyard*, \$65, and notes, "These wines need intense flavors [to complement them]. The reds pair well with duck, lamb, and beef, especially if there is a fruit sauce like a chutney. The whites also like rich, intense food, like hearty fish and poultry."

Fabrizio Iannucci, chef/owner of Alloro in Paso Robles, who with his wife Alison, reviewed the wines for this story, carries many local wines on his list and suggests such pairings as the EOS Estate 1999 Petite Syrah *Reserve* with Scaloppine di Vitello Piccariello (veal scaloppine sautéed with eggplants, portobello mushrooms, oregano, aromatic herbs, chopped tomatoes, white wine, and Scamorza cheese) and with Scottadito Balsamico (lamb chops grilled with a sauce of roasted garlic, rosemary, and aged Balsamic vinegar, served with "Bubble & Squeak" potatoes), a J. Lohr 1998 Cabernet Sauvignon *Hilltop Vineyard*.

In just two years, the Iannuccis have found much to like about life in Paso and its terrific wines. Fabrizio Iannucci remarks, "For us, Paso Robles winemakers, with their *No Nonsense Red*, *Cote de Robles*, *7th Heaven*, *Le Cash Flow*, and *James Gang Reserve* remind us of the original intent of great wine—to bring humor and joy to the table."

Asseo left his family's acclaimed St. Émilion Grand Cru property, Château Fleur Cardinale, to found L'Aventure, a west side vineyard and winery up the road from Windward; his first vintages are setting new standards for quality in Paso Robles.

Bright Future

The excitement of rapid expansion and the lure of living in "wine country" have also attracted a cadre of amateurs. Viticultural practices don't always reach high levels, and overcropping still persists among growers more familiar with traditional cash crops. Garretson admits, "Bad wines and grape growing have been a problem," and Glossner contends, "On the west side, the main impediment to the area reaching its potential is the lack of a critical mass of talented vineyard managers."

REVIEWER'S CHOICE

By Fabrizio and Alison Iannucci, proprietors of Alloro restaurant, Paso Robles

Key:

C: Characteristics, A: Aromas, F: Flavors, P: Pairing or Product use

L'Aventure

1999 *Optimus*

52% syrah, 44% cabernet sauvignon, 4% zinfandel

C: supple, complex, sweet tannins, powerful

A: vanilla, anise, sweet oak

F: currant, plum, spice, creamy vanilla

P: roast beef with truffles

J.Lohr

1998 Cabernet Sauvignon *Hilltop Vineyard*

95% cabernet sauvignon, 5% cabernet franc

C: rich, textured, concentrated fruit; long finish

A: violet, blackberry, chocolate

F: vanilla, plum, toffee, cappuccino

P: scaloppine saltimbocca

Norman

1999 *No Nonsense Red*

52% cabernet sauvignon, 24% merlot, 24% cabernet franc

C: full bodied, spicy fruit; great value!

A: mint, grass, herbs, almond

F: blackberry, capiscum, spicy oak

P: etouffee or barbecued ribs

Tablas Creek

1999 *Reserve Cuvée*

40% mourvèdre, 27% grenache noir, 23% syrah, 10% counoise

C: ripe, concentrated, complex fruit; long finish

A: mint, cherry, blackberry

F: cherry, almond, mint, pepper

P: sweetbreads or duck a l'orange

Santé's recommended Paso Robles wines appear in the "Wine, Spirits, & Food Review."



KIRK IRWIN

Promoting and marketing Paso Robles wines continues to be challenge. The strength of the region—its diversity—is a concern when it comes to forging a regional identity, especially for Rhône blends. Haas laments, "The biggest problem facing us and others making Rhônes is finding [an identifiable] spot in a retail store or on a wine list."

But quality—with effective promotion—is sure to win out. Hospice du Rhône, which Garretson founded and has helped build into an international festival for "Rhônies," the Paso Robles Zinfandel Festival, and the Paso Robles Wine Festival, which have been celebrated their tenth and twentieth years respectively, are three stellar events that help advance the area's reputation for excellence. Similar to Washington State, Paso Robles has a strong core of growers and producers working together to raise wine quality and promote the AVA through the Paso Robles Vintners and Growers Association. As Vix notes, "We have to try harder to compete. The good thing about Paso Robles is that we talk to each other." When people of vision as diverse as Gary Eberle, Jerry Lohr, Kerry Vix, Ken Volk, and Mat Garretson combine forces to move the area forward, good results are inevitable.

A healthy streak of optimism abounds among Paso Robles producers. Jerry Lohr argues, "I'm more convinced than ever that this is the place for cabernet sauvignon. We're going to be much better in five years," and Ken Volk echoes the view of many when he states, "We're one of the best districts in California for Rhône varieties." The promise of Paso Robles is being fulfilled; the proof is in the bottles of current vintages from a broad spectrum of wineries. Wine lovers looking for thrilling, great-value wines should grab a pass to Paso.