

by Peter Fish and Sara Schneider

## The next great wine country

**Paso Robles used to be famous for cattle, not Cabernets, but these days it's the most unpretentious and enjoyable wine region in the West**



Drive any Paso Robles backroad in spring, and you remember why you love California. Here are the rolling hills, deep green at this time of year with firecracker flashes of oranges and purples from poppies and lupine.

Cattle graze the hills — after all, ranching was king in this part of San Luis Obispo County for generations. And there are wide-spreading oaks — the Spanish didn't name this "oak pass" for nothing. But in between the oaks and the pastures are vineyards, just leafing out, running with geometric precision across the sinuously curving landscape.

Paso Robles has become one of California's most exciting wine regions. Ten years ago, there were perhaps 35 wineries here. Today there are more than 170. And the wines they make are garnering increasing acclaim.

But Paso Robles — call it simply "Paso" if you want to sound like a local — is also a wine region that holds to its own particular style. Paso Robles is the wine country for people who like great dining and welcoming inns, but also like open roads and no crowds, who want to talk with the winemaker in the tasting room, who still — and we know who we are — have to practice a couple of times before asking for "Viognier." A wine region for the rest of us.

### The biggest wine country

The strategy for the perfect day of wine tasting in Paso Robles is that you don't need a strategy. But you do need to make one decision, and it is this: east from the town of Paso Robles or west, because the region's wineries divide themselves pretty neatly that way.

Head east first, following State 46 as it crosses the Salinas River to lope toward the San Joaquin Valley. It won't take more than a mile before you understand one thing that makes Paso different: This is the most spacious of California wine regions. It's partly a matter of sheer size — the Paso Robles appellation takes in 610,000 acres — and partly a matter of topography. Most other wine regions, it dawns on you, are tidy little valleys. Paso is not. This wine country extends from the Santa Lucia Mountains on the west to the Temblor Range on the east, and stretches north and south with only the horizon to stop it.



Joao Canziani

**Lush, grape-filled hills surround Justin winery.**

There are a lot of good east-side wineries to choose from. You'll want to try a Syrah at Eberle Winery — its founder, Gary Eberle, is more or less responsible for introducing the grape to California. Martin & Weyrich Winery has a theatrically Tuscan tasting room and a sumptuous inn set among the vineyards. But one of our favorite big players is J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines,

which occupies gracefully rolling terrain not far from Paso Robles' tiny airport. The "J." of J. Lohr, Jerry Lohr began planting vineyards here in the 1980s and has seen the region go from unknown to underappreciated to applauded.

The east side of Paso, Lohr explains, is known for its hot days and cold nights — the 40° temperature swings here are some of the biggest in California. This climate shapes the east side's richly red Zinfandels, Cabs, and Syrahs. Ideally, Lohr says, Paso wines "have a really full, rich fruit flavor without an oversupply of tannins."

### **A small town going upscale**

As for the town of Paso Robles, for generations it was one of California's classic ranch towns, a dependably laid-back outpost of saddleries, feed stores, and John Deere dealerships. "I remember when we first got here," says Justin Baldwin, an L.A. expatriate who with his wife, Deborah, operates Justin Vineyards & Winery. "Fine dining was the bowling alley. Specifically, the tuna melt."

But the town of Paso Robles is changing too. Downtown Paso retains the stolid look of a successful small town. Arranged around a handsome central square, it holds blocks of historic buildings — a few still bearing the scars of the 2003 earthquake, but many nicely restored. If you're looking for a classic dining experience, the old Paso Robles Inn has been spruced up, with a good steakhouse and a cheerful coffee shop. But there are more urbane options too. Vinoteca is a chic wine bar that wouldn't be out of place in Napa. With an exemplary list of local wines, Villa Creek is a hangout for vintners. Not far away is a good French restaurant, Bistro Laurent. Proof that in today's Paso Robles, joie de vivre extends beyond the tuna melt.

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### **Into the west**

On your second day, you can head west from Paso Robles on Chimney Rock Road into the cooler, steeper reaches of the Santa Lucia Mountains and the vineyards that call themselves the Far Out Wineries of Paso Robles. The name somehow echoes Tolkien, and you feel you've entered Middle Earth as you twist and turn past hillside vineyards.

This is a world of smaller producers, crafting Cabs, Syrahs, and white Rhône varieties that are among the best in the state. One of the pioneers is Justin Winery. The first Paso winery to break into Wine Spectator magazine's Top 100 list, it has acquired a cult following for "Isosceles," an outside

Bordeauxstyle blend. Outsize, too, are Justin's luxuries: The winery compound includes a European-inspired inn and a first-rate restaurant, Deborah's Room.

A few bends of the road away is Tablas Creek Vineyard. Many Paso vintners are working with Rhône grapes, but only Tablas Creek is co-owned by a real Rhône wine family — the Perrins, who own the famous Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. With their partners the Haas family, they landed in Paso after scouring much of California for the chalky soil they needed for their red and white blends.

Jason Haas joined the winery about five years back, after graduate school in classical archeology. Moving with his wife from Washington, D.C., to Paso Robles stirred some culture shock, he says, but not for long. "I love what I'm doing," Haas says, "and I couldn't do it anywhere else. We arrived in April and we were amazed. By the sense of space. The air. The light." Space. Air. Light. Those are, again, what differentiate Paso from other regions. And what may keep it special. European inns, French bistros — they're enticing, but they make you worry. Part of what makes Paso Robles so much fun is that it isn't too fancy, too precious, too perfect.

But talk to the locals and those worries mostly melt away. "Most of the people you ask think the wineries are a good thing," says Doug Filipponi, a third-generation county rancher who now doubles as grower and winemaker, producing wines under the Seven Sisters and Los Padres

labels. "It's brought a lot into the community."

So maybe Paso is onto something. Drive out State 46, or up Chimney Rock Road, and you'll see the vineyards and also the grazing cows, the future and still the past, sophistication and simplicity. For now, in Paso, anything is possible. Like spring, it's all just beginning.

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