



You won't find celebrity winemakers or vanity vineyards in Paso Robles, if in fact you can find Paso Robles at all. This sleepy central California wine region – tucked 20 miles inland, equidistant between Los Angeles and San Francisco – is one of the last frontiers, a rugged terrain where the winemakers are farmers, expats and mavericks who saw an opportunity and staked their claim. They're making big red blends that break all the rules – think Syrah with Zinfandel – and the wines are emerging as some of the best, most interesting reds being produced in California.

The story of Paso Robles as one of the premier California wine regions is relatively new. Paso Robles – or “Paso” as the locals call it – used to be known primarily for almonds and beef. One of the first to seize on Paso's wine potential was Gary Eberle back in 1973. Armed with an enology degree from UC Davis, Eberle recognized that the area had the right stuff for making premium wine – good sun exposure, rich soil, and great weather. This would be particularly good country for reds, he thought, and he was right. During the day, temperatures can leap into the 90s and at night, fall into the 40s. Hot days allow grapes to build up sugar, but the cool temperatures and marine layer help retain the acidity that keeps them structured. Simply put, it's a recipe for big wines with big fruit.

“I knew this place had everything it needed for great wines, particularly Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah,” says Eberle, who was one of the major forces behind having the region declared

an AVA – American Viticultural Area – in 1983. The region is divided into east side and west side, and although not geographically precise, the north-south Highway 101 (at the junction of Highway 46) is the unofficial line between the two areas. The east tends to have hotter temperatures, with full sun exposure on gently rolling hills and water being supplied by irrigation. The west side is rockier, with a wide diversity of soil types and microclimates and enough annual rainfall – up to 60 inches – to allow for “dry farming,” which requires little reliance on irrigation. Depending on who's doing the talking, generally the east is known for user-friendly, less expensive wines, and the west for more artisanal blends. But on both sides of the valley, winemakers agree that Paso's pioneers have paved the way for shared success.

Paso Pioneers

“Our strength in Paso is very generous, friendly reds that are not demure. If you're looking for the understated experience, you might not want to look in Paso,” says Mat Garretson, who moved to Paso in 1994 to work with founding father Gary Eberle at Estrella River Winery on the east side (which is now part of Meridian). Eight years ago, he established Garretson Wine Company on the east side, and now focuses exclusively on Rhône varietals like Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvèdre, which are all red grapes, and the white grape Viognier. His website warns, “No cab. No chard. No merlot. No crybabies.” And it's an irreverent attitude that has paid off. Today, thanks to renegades like Garretson,

Rhône-style blends are among the region's hallmarks – so much so that Paso plays host to the annual Hospice du Rhône (Garretson co-founded the event a decade ago), which has become the largest celebration of Rhône-style wines in the world.

Another early believer in Paso, Dr. Stanley Hoffman planted vineyards in the 1970s in the Adelaida Hills region on the west side of Paso Robles. His Hoffman Mountain Ranch is now part of Adelaida Cellars, a winery that is taking full advantage of its wildly diverse vineyards. Winemaker Terry Culton turns out a string of excellent wines, with the focus on Rhône varieties like Syrah, and Bordeaux grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon. But in true Paso breaking-the-rules form, the surprise is the delicious Pinot Noir, a Burgundian varietal rare in Paso because of the hot weather. Thanks to a cool pocket in their vineyard, it works, and it works well.

Over on the east side, several larger producers are making some respectable reds that pack a lot of bang for the buck. At Meridian, the Reserve Syrah at \$19 a bottle is a prime example of high quality at a great price. J. Lohr Vineyard, which produces award-winning wines throughout the state, has some 2,000 acres in the eastern part of Paso Robles, and is turning out its South Ridge Syrah for a very reasonable \$15 a bottle. And south of Lohr, the Robert Hall Winery has just completed a showcase tasting room; among the offerings is an \$18 “Rhône de Robles” blend of red Grenache, Syrah, Cinsaut and Counoise.

French Connection

Paso Robles is so well suited to Rhône varieties – particularly in parts of the west side where the soil is chalkier – that the Perrin family, owners of the famed Château de Beaucastel, staked their claim to the area in 1989. This represented their first New World venture. In partnership with American importer Robert Haas, they discovered that the limestone content in the soil was similar to that of their vineyards in the Rhône. After an arduous start-up (they imported vines from France, which entailed a mandatory three-year quarantine by the U.S. government), today Tablas Creek produces world-class

RENEGADE REDS

Look for these big reds at your local wine shop or order them online

AUSTIN HOPE 2002 WESTSIDE RED (\$18). A classic Rhône-style blend with bright fruit.

ADELAIDA 2003 PINOT NOIR HMR ESTATE (\$28). Pure cherry and silky tannins make this a pleasant surprise in a region not known for Pinot Noir.

GARRETSON 2003 MOURVÈDRE (\$28). An earthy wine with deep garnet color and dark cherry and clove flavors.

SAXUM 2003 BROKEN STONES SYRAH (\$38). Deep ruby color with lush black fruit and hints of tobacco.

TABLAS CREEK 2002 ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL (\$40). A spicy blend of Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Counoise with raspberry notes and a peppery finish.

-Heather John

Rhône-style blends.

Not surprisingly, there is another French venture in Paso, the aptly named L'Aventure (the adventure). Its founder and owner, Stephan Asseo, was a noted winemaker in Bordeaux. A free spirit, Asseo felt constrained in France. “It was all history. I wanted to do something where there were no set rules, something that would be representative of the best Bordeaux winemaking, but not a copy,” he says. He planted a mix of Bordeaux and Rhône grapes and blended them following nothing more than his own taste. The result is distinctive wines like his Estate Cuvée, a luscious mix of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Petit Verdot.

Generation Next

Despite its growth and the influx of international neighbors, Paso Robles remains, in many ways, a region with a farming mentality, where the phenomenon of the celebrity winemaker has not yet arrived, but where the wines are every bit as good. Standing in his family's state-of-the-art Treana winery, 32-year-old Austin Hope says he's a farmer first and foremost. Third-generation Paso farmer, as a matter of fact. Hope's family began growing grapes in the late '70s, and Austin put in his time working in the family's venture,

which produces a fusion of Bordeaux and Rhône-style wines. Over at his own Austin Hope Winery, he is making waves with his Westside Red, a blend of Mourvèdre, Syrah, and Grenache. He's part of an emerging generation of Paso natives following in the paths of the pioneers and creating world-class wines, like 35-year-old Justin Smith with his Saxum Vineyards “Broken Stones” Syrah, and 33-year-old Matt Trevisan's Linne Calodo “Problem Child” red—a gutsy blend of Zinfandel, Mourvèdre, and Syrah. “Paso was such a new wine region when we were growing up,” says Smith, whose family has been farming the James Berry Vineyard on the west side for 25 years. “We've had to find our own way, and today Paso is getting recognized on a global scale with wines that compete anywhere in the world.”

Big, small, east, west – what Paso Robles wineries have in common is a willingness to break new ground. “Paso wines are kind of like the people,” Garretson adds. “Folks here are very outgoing, adventurous, and generous. We like to take risks, and the wines reflect that.”

Malachy Duffy is a frequent Bon Appetit contributor.