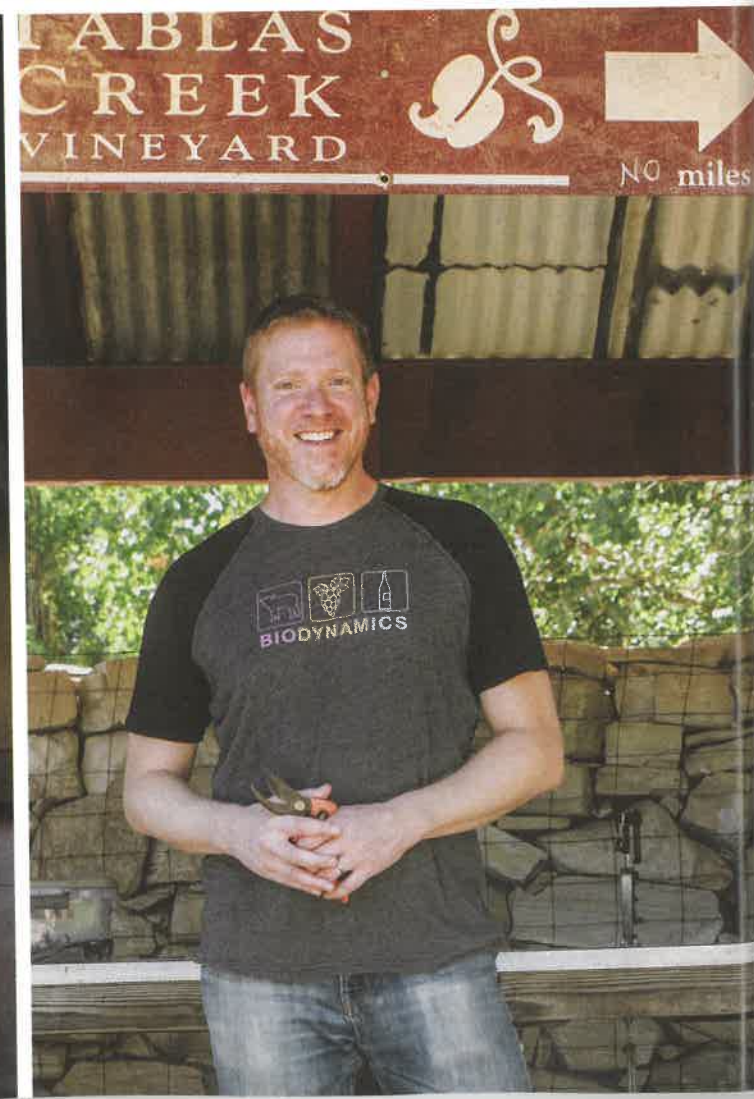


Clockwise from above: the estate entrance; current partner and general manager Jason Haas; traditional foudres in the wine cellar



Tablas Creek

Two wine families combined their expertise and persistence to build a North American Rhône community from the ground up, creating a singular range of Rhône-style varietal wines and blends

STORY SARA SCHNEIDER

Let's say your thoughts are running to a crisp, aromatic white on a warm spring afternoon. A little Bourboulenc, maybe? Or how about some Picardan? Until recently, your search for wines made from these approved but highly obscure Châteauneuf-du-Pape grape varieties would almost surely have drawn a blank. Not only do many of the appellation's 13 approved grapes disappear into blends, but in the case of these two, there are precious few rows growing in the entire world.

Tablas Creek Vineyard – California Central Coast's outpost of the partnership between the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel in the southern Rhône and the Haas family, longtime wine importers in the US – has gone to great lengths to shore up the shortfall. Now you can sip glasses (albeit not many) of the rare wines – as well as many more Tablas-facilitated bottles of other compelling US-grown Rhône varietals and blends. But it wasn't easy...

RHÔNE FOCUS

When they began their California search for vineyard land in the mid-1980s, US wine importer Robert Haas and his friends and partners Jean-Pierre and François Perrin (fourth-generation current proprietors of the prominent Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape) harboured no doubt that it was possible for terrific wines to be produced in the state from southern Rhône grape varieties.

All the raw material was in place – dry Mediterranean climate, shallow rocky soils (even limestone, if you looked carefully). What they wondered was, why weren't more growers planting Grenache, Syrah or Mourvèdre?

The partners combed the state, from Napa Valley to the Sierra Foothills to Paso Robles, where they famously found their spot – a 49ha ranch on the Central Coast, west of Paso Robles proper, 19km as the crow flies from the Pacific ocean, with warm days, cool nights and – the clincher – limestone-rich soils. Fast-forward to 1997, and the team produced its first vintage of

Tablas Creek's Rhône wines. They were modelled on the blends of Beaucastel but crafted among the young vines on the 450m ridges between the town in the valley and the cooling coast. The rest is American wine history.

Tablas Creek (tablascreek.com) is the first name in the sentence, the first search on the wine list, when it comes to domestic Rhône blends – and now-rare, single-variety bottlings. A quarter of a century on, wine styles hover between New World and Old. They've introduced a generation of wine lovers to the earthy beauty of wines that

'Tablas Creek has bottled the rarest of Rhône varieties on their own – likely one-offs in the world'

revel in California's unique climate and geology. Wines with a distinct nod to the inspiration and character of their Châteauneuf archetypes.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

The seasoned Haas and Perrin brothers were under no misconception that the work required between purchasing promising land and releasing their first bottles would be easy. It took the three years they had expected to get cuttings from Beaucastel through the US quarantine system. Then more years to propagate them in quantities sufficient to plant vineyards.

But they were slightly less prepared for the collective shrug they received from the US market after the first flush of initial-vintage success. For wine lovers only just becoming enamoured of varietal Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay or Pinot Noir at the time, grapes like Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Roussanne and Viognier required a hand-sell to restaurant and retail customers. The inventory didn't move. As Jason Haas, son of Robert and now partner and general manager of Tablas Creek, says: 'We overestimated ►

the market's readiness for what we were doing. We were making wines from grapes that people didn't know – French names they couldn't pronounce, from a part of California that didn't have a reputation.'

But as the younger Haas reports, his late father (Robert Haas passed away aged 90 in 2018) was ever-confident that he could make something happen. Jason Haas came aboard in 2002, having spent several earlier harvests working with the Perrin clan at Beaucastel in France, and together they forged bridges to consumers. They opened a tasting room and started a wine club to sell directly to a growing and excited customer base. They began to support the nascent communities they were part of – including the now-infamous Rhône Rangers, a coterie of US producers that, with tongue firmly in cheek, combined American chutzpah with southern French sensibilities, managing to build a fervent fan base for Rhône varieties and blends.

BRINK OF EXTINCTION

It's well known that 13 varieties are approved in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. In reality, a few of those grapes never show up in bottle because they were nearly lost to phylloxera in the late-1800s. Those already struggling in the vineyard – Picardan, for instance, particularly prone to powdery mildew – were simply never replanted.

Jacques Perrin, the father of Jean-Pierre and François, assumed the management of Beaucastel during the 1950s, and he rued the omissions. Convinced that he could make wines that more accurately expressed the full terroir of Châteauneuf if he had every variety in his arsenal, he set off to find the 'lost grapes' – Vaccarèse, Terret Noir, Bourboulenc, and that Picardan. According to Haas, the elder Perrin felt that the overwhelmingly Grenache-based blends made at the time lacked richness.

As it turned out, it was Mourvèdre that impressed Perrin, who made it the base of his flagship Beaucastel blend, rare to this day in the Grenache-heavy region – and echoed by the Haas family, who chose the site for Tablas thanks to its suitability for late-ripening Mourvèdre.

In the case of Picardan, Perrin was able to find it in a single vineyard, so they planted only a precious couple of rows at Beaucastel. It almost certainly would have gone extinct otherwise.

Today, there is little more than a single hectare of Picardan still planted in France and about 0.2ha (half an acre) at Tablas Creek. The Haas team, too, believed that they could craft the best Rhône blends from their limestone-rich soils if they had every last variety to work with. And to that end, they began the arduous process of



shepherding cuttings from the Perrins' experimental vineyard at Beaucastel through quarantine to propagate in the nursery they established on their property.

The goal was to incorporate the new wines in their cellar and make the cuttings available to American growers across the board. The final varieties have only just come online in the last couple of years, some earning a splash in the current-vintage bottlings of Esprit de Tablas and Esprit de Tablas Blanc, the estate's flagship blends. But wait, there's more...!

From its vineyard blocks, Tablas Creek has bottled the rarest of Rhône varieties on their own – likely one-offs in the world. That Picardan and Bourboulenc? They're available, to the delight of the geekiest of fans.

ENVIRONMENTAL PIONEERS

Starting in the 1950s – well ahead of other producers – Jacques Perrin began moving Château de Beaucastel (and all subsequent vineyards that the family would acquire or control) to organic farming. His belief: that it was the only reliable way to show off the character of the place. Organic, then, was a given from the get-go for Tablas Creek. But that was only the starting point.

As Haas describes it: 'Take the idea [of organic farming] to its logical conclusion, and it's not that we should be eliminating [just] chemical herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers. We should be trying to eliminate anything that would have to come from off the property.'



Clockwise from above left: Robert Haas (right) with Jean-Pierre and François Perrin at Château de Beaucastel in the mid-1980s; sheep among the Tablas Creek vines; wine tasting on the sunny patio in Paso Robles

'Organic was a given from the get-go for Tablas Creek – but that was only the starting point'

There's composting, sheep to graze, beneficial insect habitats... the holistic ecosystem of biodynamics, in other words, for an initial experimental swath of the vineyard. The results were beyond Haas' expectations – immediate rather than long-term. In the first year, blocks from that biodynamic swath, tasted blind, outsourced other samples across all varieties. The second year, the same. Despite the apparent quality benefits of that holistic farming, though, Haas admits they struggled to see the advantage of some of the less-scientific elements of biodynamics.

Then came a phone call from the nascent Regenerative Organic Alliance (regenorganic.org). 'You're already farming biodynamically, and you have your own flock of sheep [they have a shepherd on staff] – would you be part of the new certification we're developing?'

Haas admits a less-than-eager reaction: not another certification! But a little research suggested that the new system – building soil health while focusing on the entire vineyard eco-system – held onto the pieces of biodynamics they thought were essential and left behind the parts that were maybe a distraction.

It included issues such as business practices and climate change that were already top of mind for Haas. 'Farming in a way that incorporated everything from biodiversity in soil health to reducing the resources you use, how you treat your workers, to animal welfare. It felt like [Regenerative Organic farming] could be a game-changer in agriculture's relationship to the environment. It wasn't just, how can your farm be less of the problem? It was, how can agriculture be part of the solution to the big-picture issues of resource scarcity and climate change?' In 2020, Tablas Creek became the first Regenerative Organic Certified winery worldwide. (*More on regenerative viticulture in the next issue of Decanter.*)

For its part, Château de Beaucastel has introduced a flock of sheep on one of its properties in Gigondas, and moved away from regular tilling. Recent photos show flowers growing among the vines – something that would have been unimaginable even a few years ago.

NATURAL SYNERGY

Tablas Creek Vineyard was undoubtedly not the first producer to pick up the Rhône mantle in the US. But with its close modelling of its sister, Château de Beaucastel – including climate, soil, farming, cuttings, even the size of the estate – theirs is a partnership that sets up a fascinating study of the respective terroirs. Tasted side by side, according to Haas, the wines' similarities jump out more than their differences. The climates aren't identical – California is a little more extreme, with warmer days, cooler nights and a drier summer. 'You get a primary vibrancy from all of the sun producing a pure expression of fruit, but also the colder shoulder seasons producing more acid.'

'In France, where you don't have quite that drama of the sun, you get more earth when the wines are young.' Of course, Haas admits, there are vintages in France that could have been made in California, and vice versa. But in the end, the wines' flavour profiles edge closer and closer. 'As they age,' he says, 'because of that loamy, earthy component, the fruit comes down and merges in the balance.'

Tablas Creek's quarter-century journey in Paso Robles has rendered moot the partners' original question: why aren't more growers capitalising on this California promise of great Rhônes? They have. In fits and starts, with perhaps too many misplaced plantings of Syrah along the way, vintners have settled in with beautiful, balanced productions that do Châteauneuf proud.

And in building out a foundation that's even more prominent than its structure, Tablas Creek has played an outsized role. ►

Schneider's pick: a taste of Tablas Creek

① Tablas Creek, Esprit Blanc de Tablas, Adelaida District, Paso Robles 2020 94

£51.99 (2019) Alexander Hadleigh, Liberty Wines
This foudre-matured Roussanne-Grenache Blanc-based blend has a lovely richness underneath vibrant freshness. Lifted citrus aromas are layered with white nectarine, pineapple and honey underpinned with oyster-shell minerality. Complex; distinctive texture, a hint of beeswax, a gamut of apple, pear, stone fruit and pineapple, lingering with a bit of salinity for a savoury finish. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2023-2032 **Alcohol** 13%

② Tablas Creek, Bourboulenc, Adelaida District, Paso Robles 2021 93

US\$39.99 Graham Wine Co
One of the only standalone bottlings of this unicorn white variety in the world. Its balance of richness and mouthwatering acidity make it dynamite in a blend, but nuances of aroma and flavour make this Bourboulenc a can't-miss proposition on its own. Breezy aromas of river-stone minerality and herbs with broad citrus. The palate is rich yet bright and crisp at the same time. A hint of apricot joins Meyer lemon and yuzu citrus with an orange-vanilla note, finishing on puckery lime zest. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 13.5%

③ Tablas Creek, Picardan, Adelaida District, Paso Robles 2021 93

US\$39.99 Graham Wine Co
Beautiful aromatics strike a high note, with summer jasmine, lime and white nectarine against a backdrop of chalky minerality and

'That Picardan and Bourboulenc? They're available, to the delight of the geekiest of fans'

a briny ocean breeze. Citrus flavours run to kaffir lime on a bright palate, with savoury green herbs leading to a finish vibrant with mouthwatering minerals and salinity. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 12%

Tablas Creek, Patelin de Tablas Blanc, Paso Robles 2021 92

£31.99 Alexander Hadleigh, Liberty Wines, The Wine Reserve
A Grenache Blanc and Viognier-based blend, including a touch of Bourboulenc, sourced from a range of Paso vineyards. White peach, orange peel and delicate honeysuckle aromas are balanced by ocean-breeze minerality and chalky earthiness. It walks the fine line between richness and crispness, weight and freshness. Lemon, orange and lime zest layered with fuzzy stone fruit and hints of tropicals, with a refreshing touch of puckery zest. **Drink** 2023-2025 **Alc** 12.5%

④ Tablas Creek, Esprit de Tablas, Adelaida District, Paso Robles 2020 96

£56.99 (2017) Alexander Hadleigh, Liberty Wines
A Mourvèdre-Grenache-Syrah-based blend with a touch of Vaccarèse and Cinsault, Esprit balances rich meatiness with lush,

juicy fruit. On the nose, dark berry aromas give way to toasted spice, fresh-turned earth and wild fennel notes under sweet, pungent violet. A full body offers pure black cherry and dark raspberry flavours, with a touch of anise, against fine, subtle tannins. Seamless, impeccable balance carries through a long finish. Hard to resist now, but will evolve into a savoury beauty. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2023-2040 **Alc** 13.5%

⑤ Tablas Creek, Vaccarèse, Adelaida District, Paso Robles 2020 93

US\$39.99 Graham Wine Co
A fascinating mix of rustic tannins, exotic spice and forest botanicals make a worthy case for more of this variety (and it has earned a splash in the Esprit blend in its second vintage). A beautiful floral quality floats over cardamom, cloves, pepper and damp loam aromas, with plum and berry flavours seasoned by savoury herbs and iron-rich minerality following up. Grippy tannins emerge on a long finish. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2023-2027 **Alc** 13%

Tablas Creek, Patelin de Tablas, Paso Robles 2021 92

£26.99 (2018) Alexander Hadleigh, Liberty Wines, Pacific Wines
Bright, lifted aromas open on this Syrah-Grenache-Mourvèdre-based blend, with a touch of Counoise – blueberries and earthy spices wrapped with lovely floral notes. The palate dances with texture, its juicy black raspberry and cherry flavours pure, vibrant and long. There's an irresistible drink-me-now message in this, but deceptive weight and a vein of iron-rich minerality keep it serious, too. **Drink** 2023-2027 **Alc** 12.5%

Tablas Creek, Terret Noir, Adelaida District, Paso Robles 2020 92

US\$35 tablascreek.com
A likely one-of-a-kind taste, this has a pale, translucent, clear-rimmed colour that seems to contradict its exuberant aromas, flavours and tannins. High-toned florals and spice star on the nose, with hints of juniper, black cherry and crushed granite. Red fruit on the palate carries echoes of the floral bouquet, raspberry and cherry brightened with a sour-orange tang and anchored by deceptively grippy tannins. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2023-2027 **Alc** 12.5% **D**



PHOTOGRAPH PATRICK IBARRA PHOTOGRAPHY

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