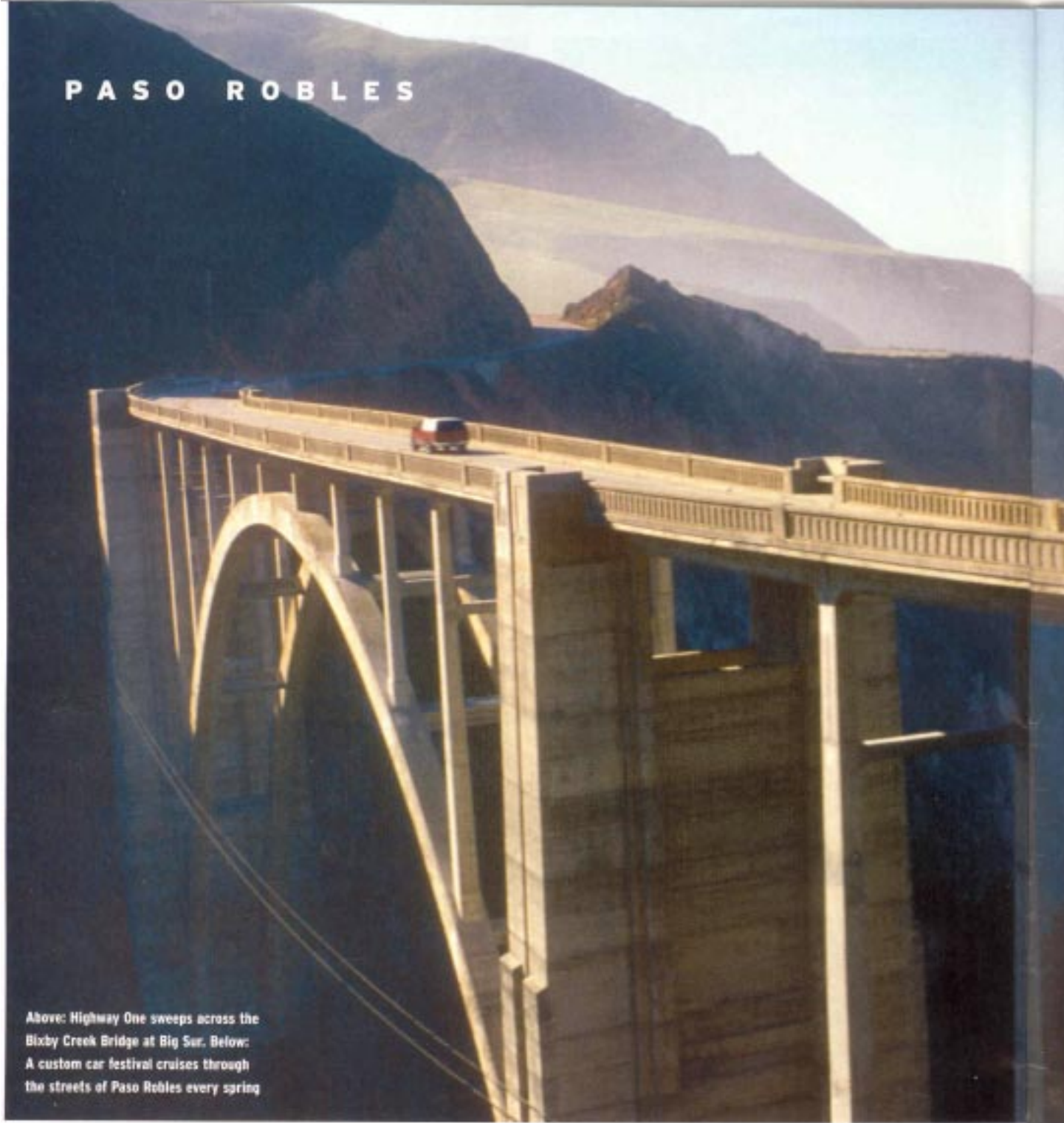
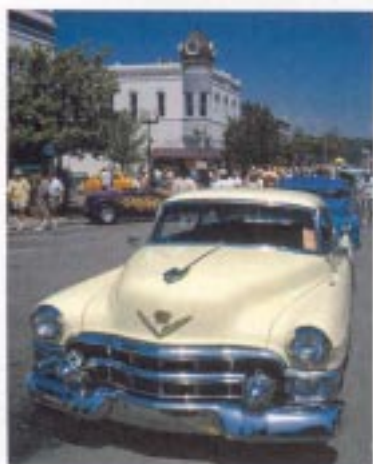


PASO ROBLES



Above: Highway One sweeps across the Bixby Creek Bridge at Big Sur. Below: A custom car festival cruises through the streets of Paso Robles every spring



THE UNSPOILT AND relatively undiscovered wine country of California's Central Coast, centred on the small town of Paso Robles, lies about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, but it's a world away from either of them.

This is a quiet place where cattle ranches and almond orchards were the main forms of agriculture until Gary Eberle planted 200ha (hectares) of wine grapes and started Estrella River Win-

ery in 1973. Now, more than 85 producers make wine from 6,000ha of vineyards that produce close to \$75 million-worth of grapes each year. San Luis Obispo County, where Paso Robles is located, is the fourth largest wine grape-producing county in the state, after Sonoma, Napa and Monterey counties – but it's still a quiet place.

That makes Paso, as the locals call the town, fun to visit because the big crowds head to the Napa Valley far to

A WORLD AWAY

The wine country of California's Central Coast doesn't attract the crowds that Napa does. But **JANICE FUHRMAN** finds this may be the only thing it lacks



the north. And the wineries featured in the movie *Sideways*, which are getting thronged by star-struck Los Angelenos these days, are down near Santa Barbara, some 100-130km away. (Incidentally, while *robles* is Spanish for oak and is pronounced 'roe-blaze' in that language, Californians pronounce it to rhyme with 'nobles'.)

The area's climate and soils are suited to the typical California Cabernet-Chardonnay-Zinfandel trinity, and the wine industry here was built

on these varieties. But in recent years, Rhône varieties have become ascendant. One enormously successful example is Tablas Creek, a joint venture of the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and American wine importer Robert Haas. The winery produces elegant, sophisticated and delicious white and red blends from Rhône clones imported from the Perrins' French properties.

To get a handle on the wines of Paso Robles, it's important to understand that

there are actually two very distinct sub-regions within its boundaries. Highway 101 – one of California's main north-south roads – divides Paso Robles into an east and a west side. Both sides are planted with thousands of hectares of grapes, but there are stark differences in what characterises them.

The east side is relatively flat, with sandy loam soils cut by a deep gorge washed down to serpentine bedrock by the Salinas River. The west side features rolling hills and valleys, some

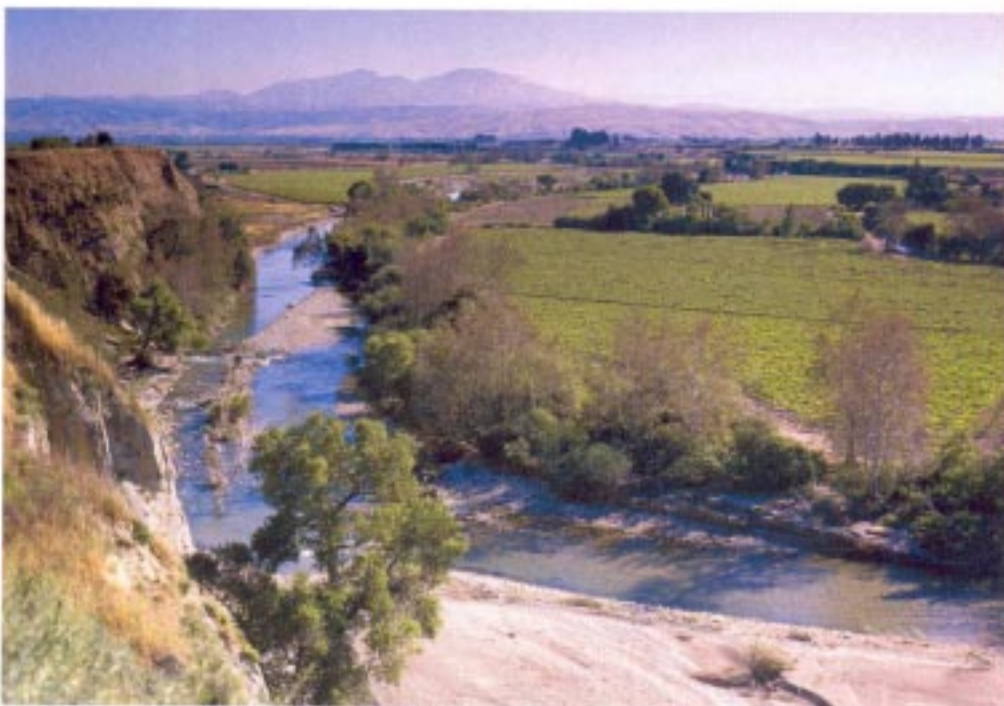
quite steep, built from tilted tables of white, chalky, sedimentary limestone shale. Chunks of the white stone litter the upper slopes of the hills where rains have washed away the topsoil. This hilly land rises as you take Route 46 West for 30 km, cresting the Santa Lucia Range of mountains, and then swiftly descends to the seaside town of Cambria. To the north, these wild peaks plunge to the sea at Big Sur, where wild turkeys, mountain lions, bobcats, deer and other wildlife thrive. On one of the peaks at the south end of the range is William Randolph Hearst's opulent residence at San Simeon, well worth a visit if you're in the area.

While summer days are hot, cool ocean air pours through what's called the Templeton Gap at night and washes differentially around the west side's hills, cooling some vineyards, missing others, and creating a plethora of microclimates. It's among these hills that most of the small, high-quality wineries can be found.

MUST-SEE WINERIES

With so many wineries, it may be difficult for a visitor to know which are must-see and must-taste. Here are my recommendations: Tablas Creek, on a beautiful stretch of Adelaida Road, not only has superb Rhône-style wines, but features beautiful and massive stone-work walls built out of rock hauled from the vineyards. While you're on Adelaida Road, stop in at Adelaida Cellars, where winemaker Terry Culton makes a Rhône-style red from 50% Mourvèdre, 22% Syrah, 17% Cunoise, and 11% Grenache Noir. He also makes Cabernet Sauvignon from the mountaintop Viking Vineyard, planted on a 45° slope that yields wine with a distinct flavour of blueberries.

J. Lohr Vineyards has 800 ha in Paso Robles and makes reasonably priced Cabernet Sauvignons that consistently win awards. It's worth tasting through all the Lohr bottlings just to experience the virtues that modestly priced wines can show. If you head west on Highway 46, you'll see Bonny Doon's tasting facility on the left side of the road. The original building burned down last



The Salinas River cuts through sandy loam soils typical of the western side of the Paso Robles area

year, so Bonny Doon put up a tasting tent, followed by a tasting trailer (with plastic pink flamingos out front). A new tasting room should be completed this autumn. Bonny Doon is the winery of madcap Randall Gram, but his wines are serious even if he isn't, especially the Roussanne from the Chequera Vineyard.

Farther west, Route 46 intersects with Chimney Rock Road, and a drive up that bucolic two-lane road into the Santa Lucia highlands brings you to Deborah and Justin Baldwin's Justin Winery, with its justly famous Isosceles Bordeaux blend. Another one of Paso's interesting wineries is Martin & Weyrich, which specializes in Italian varieties such as Sangiovese and Nebbiolo, but also Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Zinfandel lovers should head out North Bethel Road to Peachy Canyon Winery where Doug Beckett crafts some of the best Zins in this area, which is known for its fine Zinfandel vineyards. Ditto for Tobin James Cellars on Union Road, where Toby Shumrick makes deep, dark and spicy Zinfandels.

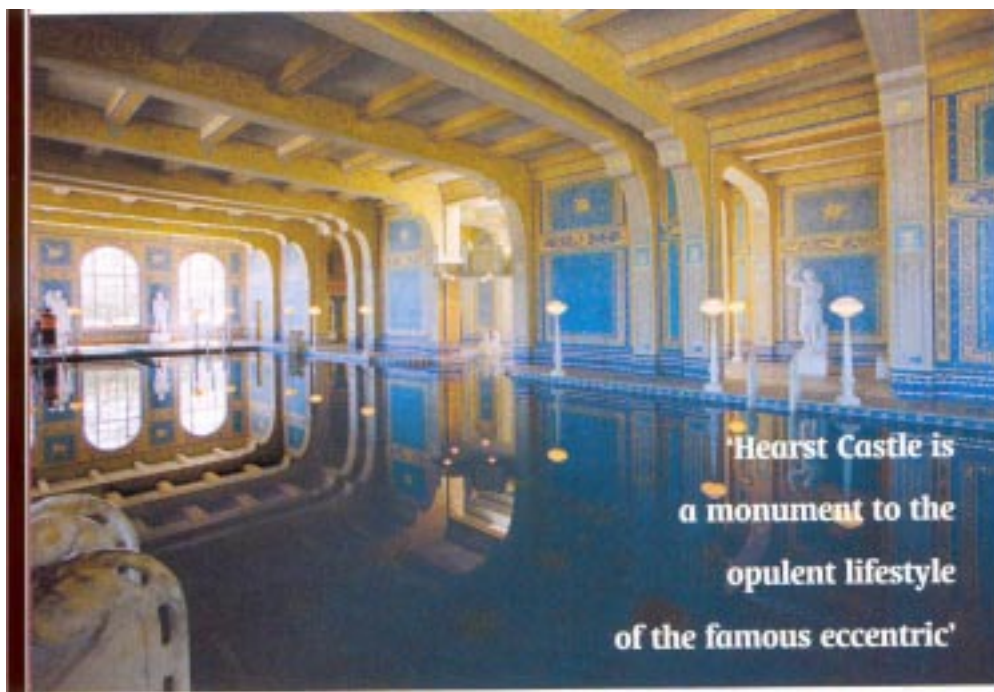
Just south of Paso is the small town of Templeton, where Ken Volk focuses on Pinot Noir, Merlot and especially Syrah at his Wild Horse Winery. It's

named for the wild mustangs that still roam free on the vast plains east of Templeton.

Treana Winery doesn't have a tasting room, but you should consider buying a bottle of its red wine at a wine shop in Paso. It's made from Cabernet, Merlot, Syrah, Sangiovese and Petite Sirah and has a unique flavour of wineberries with aromas of chocolate, cinnamon and cedar.

If you travel to the east side, stop at Eberle Winery, where regional pioneer Gary has scaled production back to a mere 25,000 cases of top-notch Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and a Cabernet-Syrah blend, as well as Chardonnay and Viognier. Meridian and EOS Estate Winery are also on Route 46 East, both big-production operations with a focus on Bordeaux varieties.

While Paso Robles is the centre of the Central Coast's wine country, notable wineries are scattered in the vicinity. Edna Valley Vineyard and Baileyana Winery are both located in San Luis Obispo, about 48km south of Paso, and Talley Vineyards and Laetitia are in Arroyo Grande, about 16km south of San Luis Obispo. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are the choice varieties in both of these cool-climate towns.



Tickets are required for a visit to Hearst Castle, but the tour is more than worth it.

ROLL UP, ROLL UP

Paso Robles has several events each year for wine lovers. Its best known is the annual Hospice du Rhône, held in mid-May for the past 13 years. It attracts hundreds of the world's leading Rhône-style producers – not just Central Coast wineries – and draws thousands of visitors. Robert Parker has referred to it as 'a multi-day orgy of Rhône-styled wines'. Visit www.hospicedurhone.org for information.

The annual Paso Robles Wine Festival is held in the third week of May. It's a three-day affair with a golf tournament and winery events on the Friday, the big festival of 300 wineries at the town's central park from noon to five on Saturday, and winery events on Sunday. Visit www.pasowine.com for details.

The Paso Robles Vintners and Growers Association also sponsors a Wine University – educational classes about grape growing and winemaking – in early September, a Harvest Wine Tour in October, and an annual Zinfandel Festival in March. Visit www.pasowine.com for details.

EXCURSIONS

Head west from Paso Robles over High-

way 46 to Cambria on the coast, then turn right and head up Highway 1 about 25km to San Simeon, where, high on a mountain to the east, William Randolph Hearst built his Xanadu: Hearst Castle. Reservations for tour tickets are required, but the tour is more than worth it, as you get to see how the extremely rich lived in the 1930s. Visit www.hearstcastle.com for information.

Breakaway Tours will handle all the transportation details for wine tasting and touring, trips to the ocean, Hearst Castle, and region's Franciscan missions, as well as other attractions. Visit www.breakaway-tours.com

The Paso Robles Inn and Hot Springs has been a destination resort for over 100 years – almost back to the times when Jesse James hid out in these parts. The newly remodeled resort, located downtown, has natural hot mineral baths. Visit pasoroblesinn.com

LODGING

A complete list of accommodations is available at pasorobleschamber.com

USEFUL LINKS

www.pasowine.com
www.go2paso.com

WINERY CONTACTS

Adelaida Cellars

5805 Adelaida Road
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 239 8980
www.adelaida.com

+1 805 481 1772
www.laetitiawine.com

Baileyana Winery

5828 Orcutt Road
 San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
 +1 805 269 8200
www.baileyana.com

Martin & Weyrich Winery

2610 Buena Vista Drive
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 238 2520
www.martinweyrich.com

Bonny Doon Vineyard

2485 Highway 46 West
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 239 5614
bonnydoonvineyard.com

Meridian Vineyards

7000 Highway 46 East
 Paso Robles, CA 93445
 +1 805 226 7133
www.meridianvineyards.com

Eberle Winery

5.5km east of Route 101
 on Highway 46 East
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 238 9607
www.eberlewinery.com

Peachy Canyon Winery

1480 North Bethel Road
 Templeton, CA 93465
 +1 805 239 1918
www.peachycanyon.com

Edna Valley Vineyard

2585 Biddle Rands Road
 San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
 +1 805 544 5855
www.ednavalley.com

Tablas Creek Vineyard

9339 Adelaida Road
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 237 1231
www.tablascreek.com

EOS Estate Winery

5625 Highway 46 East
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 239 2562
www.eosvintage.com

Talley Vineyards

3031 Lopez Drive
 Arroyo Grande, CA 93420
 +1 805 489 0446
www.talleyvineyards.com

J Lohr Vineyards & Wines

6160 Airport Road
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 239 8900 x17
www.jlohr.com

Tobin James Cellars

8950 Union Road
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 239 2204
www.tobinjames.com

Justin Winery

11680 Chimney Road Road
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 238 6932
www.ustinwine.com

Treana Winery

(no tasting room)
 PO Box 3260
 Paso Robles, CA 93446
 +1 805 238 6979 x10
www.treana.com

Laelitia Vineyard and Winery

453 Laelitia Vineyard Drive
 Arroyo Grande, CA 93420

Wild Horse Winery

1437 Wild Horse
 Winery Court
 Templeton, CA 93465
 +1 805 434 2541
www.wildhorsewinery.com

