

ROOM to grow



With 11 freshly minted sub-regions, a reputation for making iconic Rhône blends and a legion of ambitious neo-garagistes, the Californian Central Coast giant Paso Robles is assuming its mantle as a fine wine region, finds *Roger Morris*

IF THE California premium wine business were a family venture, Sonoma County and Napa Valley would be the momma and the papa of this sprawling brood of regions strung up and down the Pacific Coast – the parents who did the pioneering work that gave the state, and indeed the United States, a seat at the table of global producers of fine wines.

But now attention has increasingly turned to Paso Robles, much like the strapping teenage son: full of potential, some already realised, more yet to come. Located midway between Los Angeles

and San Francisco, Paso Robles is a somewhat isolated region that spreads out from the town of the same name. It has vast flatland vineyards, mainly in the east, and rugged hillside plots, mainly in the western mountains separating Paso from the Pacific. In its landscape and isolation, a comparison to Languedoc is an obvious one.

For years, winemakers in the more populous northern counties prized Paso's cornucopia of fruit. Indeed a huge amount – slightly more than half – of the region's grapes, less pricey than those

grown in Napa and Sonoma, still flows north to make premium and everyday wines. Paso locals like to say that they provide the "secret ingredient" for their upstate competitors.

However, Paso is today making its reputation – and extending the reputation of California wines in general – by growing Rhône and Mediterranean grapes to make high-end varietal wines, mainly Syrah, as well as iconic red and white blends. Moreover, Paso is the place where dreams are still being realised; a place where ambitious assistant



winemakers, as well as newcomers who haven't the capital for their own wineries and vineyards, have established themselves as West Coast *garagistes*. Many of these virtual wineries consist of only a ton or two of purchased fruit and a corner in someone's winemaking facility.

GROWTH IN STATURE

Unlike Napa, Sonoma and other northern regions, whose winemaking roots go back into the 1800s, Paso Robles is a relative newcomer to winemaking, although grape farming has been going on for some time. The region experienced its first wave of serious commercial winemaking when a dozen or so wineries set up shop during the 1980s. As recently as a decade ago, it had only 35 wineries. Now it has over 180 and counting, and it is recognised as California's fastest growing

wine region, with more than 26,000 acres in vineyards.

"Paso Robles is now becoming known across the globe," claims Austin Hope, who heads Hope Family Wines. Hope, whose family moved to Paso Robles to grow tree fruit and grapes in 1978, is one of a growing number of second-generation wine producers in a region so young there are almost no third-generation winemakers.

The Hopes started out growing Cabernet Sauvignon for one of Napa Valley's best-regarded wineries, Caymus Cellars, to use in Liberty School, then its second-label red wine. The Hopes eventually bought the Liberty School label from Caymus and expanded it, but their breakthrough wine was a luxury red blend called Treana. "Blending is such a natural process," Hope says. "Cabernet doesn't always have the best mid-palate, so we added Syrah to create Treana Red. At the time, people told me I was crazy to make a high-priced red wine that wasn't a varietal."

BLENDING UP A STORM

Another pioneer wine blender in the region is Tablas Creek, a joint venture formed in 1989 between the Rhône Valley's Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel and the Haas family, who own importer Vineyard Brands. "You see more blends here than anywhere in California," says Tablas Creek's Jason Haas, another second-generation leader. "A difference from elsewhere is that more wineries here are producing blends that are their best

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Feature findings

- > Located midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, Paso Robles is a somewhat isolated region that spreads out from the town of the same name.
- > Paso is today making its reputation by growing Rhône and Mediterranean grapes to make high-end varietal wines as well as iconic red and white blends.
- > Paso Robles is a place where ambitious assistant winemakers and newcomers have established themselves as West Coast *garagistes*.
- > Federal authorities in November 2014 created 11 new sub-districts within the Paso Robles appellation.
- > Paso Robles' growth in quality wine production has also resulted in the increased agri-tourism that follows an area's enhanced reputation.

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In addition to the standard "GSM" grapes (Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre) common in southern France, Haas says Tablas Creek has started planting its "second wave of imports" – Clairette, Picardin, Terret Noir – and will soon have planted all of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape wine grapes. Tablas Creek is also leading a trend toward biodynamic production.

THE NEO-GARAGISTES

Much of the excitement in Paso these days, however, is coming from its neo-garagistes. "Many of the new wineries are small ones without a lot of money, often without their own facilities," says Chris Taranto, communications director for the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance (PRWCA), "and they are very innovative in their winemaking." Many of the new brands, he says, are being created

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by assistant winemakers at established wineries, who generally start up with a few hundred cases, often with the initial assistance of their current employers.

One such newcomer is Guillaume Fabré, who was assistant winemaker at

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L'Aventure winery when he made his first 50 cases in 2007 on an experimental basis. Like L'Aventure owner Stephan Asseo, Fabré is French and learned his winemaking there. "Finally, last year I needed to make a choice," Fabré says, "I needed to make the jump."

He landed in shared facilities, producing 1,400 cases of Clos Solene, his new brand, in an industrial park alongside Route 101, the four-lane highway that splits Paso Robles into its hilly west side and its flatter east side. With nine wineries

located in the park over the past two years, Paso's self-labelled "Tin City" has become an incubator for small and experimental wineries.

Another tenant of Tin City is Giornata winery, owned by Brian and Stephanie Terrizzi, who grow Nebbiolo nearby and who are in the vanguard of a small group of locals who believe that northern Italian varieties can have a place in Paso alongside the Rhônes.

Many winemakers in Paso Robles, Taranto says, are moving toward a style of winemaking that seeks a median between all-stainless steel and too much new oak, with concrete fermentation and storage tanks becoming quite popular.

Tablas Creek's Haas says in addition to concrete vessels, some wineries, including his, are employing larger cooperage to reduce the oak influence in the wines.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

But more than anything else, the talk of Paso Robles these days is that, after a decade of submissions and discussions, the federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), which grants wine appellation status in the US, in November 2014 officially created 11 new sub-districts within the Paso Robles appellation.

"Justin Smith [of Saxum winery] and I started talking years ago about creating a Templeton Gap appellation," Hope says, "and other folks caught wind of it and got involved. It's a good thing, because it tells the Paso Robles story at another level."

Some new districts officially have "Paso Robles" in their names, others do not.

10 Paso Robles wineries to watch

These 10 wineries provide a good cross-section of Paso Robles at its best – garagiste and estate, established and new, affordable to very expensive.

AARON

For the past dozen years, winemaker Aaron Jackson has been sourcing Rhône varieties and Zinfandel grapes to make high-end blends and a Petite Sirah (California's version of Durif). He also produces Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Viognier under the Aequorea label.

CLOS SELENE

From his shared winery in Paso Robles' "Tin City", French-born Guillaume Fabré makes small-lot production of Syrah and Rhône-style blends, often using barrel fermentation.

DENNER

This 109-acre vineyard located in Templeton Gap, Paso's wind tunnel to the Pacific, grows 19 different varieties, most of which end up in blends. Denner sells fruit to several other prominent wineries. Young Anthony Yount, its winemaker, also has his own Kinero label.

GIORNATA

An island of Italian-style winemaking in a sea of Rhône, the Terrizzi family makes wine from one of the few plots of Nebbiolo in the region, which it also manages. Their cash-flow brand is Broadside.

HALTER RANCH

Swiss billionaire Hansjörg Wyss has spent his money wisely on this ecology-conscious property in the Adelaida district. Winemaker Kevin Sass, formerly with Justin just down the road, makes excellent blends as well as Cabernet and Syrah varieties.

HOPE FAMILY

Hope Family is a long-time leader in Paso Robles, making iconic blends (Treana, Austin Hope), volume-but-quality blends (Troublemaker) and popular single varietal wines (Liberty School). Their Candor Zinfandels and Merlots are unusual blends, even for Paso Robles, coming from more than one vintage and vineyard.

L'AVENTURE

Former Bordeaux winemaker Stephan Asseo wanted to escape France's strict winemaking regulations and searched worldwide before putting down roots and rootstocks on this estate. Rhône and Bordeaux varieties are planted on rolling hills that look like green sand dunes, and the beauty of his blends matches their provenance.

LAW ESTATE

Scott Hawley is winemaker at this ambitious new property along Peachy Canyon Road, which has already garnered high scores from Parker and others for its red blends. As with his own Torrin label, Hawley says he makes wines fashioned to improve with age.

SAXUM

Justin Smith wasn't the first to make big, burly reds in Paso, but his Syrah and red blends were breakout wines for the region, first made when he was just a few years out of college. He ended up being a cover boy for *Wine Spectator* in 2011.

TABLAS CREEK

Tablas Creek wines are perhaps the most Rhône-like in Paso Robles, not surprising considering co-owner the Perrin family also owns Château de Beaucastel.

Three of the sub-appellations are on the west side of town – Adelaida, Paso Robles Willow Creek and Templeton Gap. Two – San Miguel and Paso Robles Estrella – are in the north, while Creston, El Pomar and Paso Robles Genesco are in the centre. Further east are Paso Robles Highlands and San Juan Creek, and the last of the 11, Santa Margarita Ranch, is in the south.

TOURIST TRAP

Paso Robles' growth in quality wine production has also resulted in the increased agri-tourism that usually follows an area's enhanced reputation. Paso Robles is still a relatively small city of about 30,000 residents, but it has several quality restaurants and small hotels as well as a burgeoning guided-tour business. Most large wineries have established tasting rooms, some at their wineries and some in the city. Chloé Asseo, born in France and only seven years old when her parents moved to Paso to start L'Aventure, decided to stay with the family business, although she is more interested in marketing than winemaking. "We're getting a lot more tourism in recent years, especially from within California," she says. While many tourists make repeated visits to Napa and Sonoma, Paso is now giving them an interesting alternative. "We're smaller and more rustic," Asseo says proudly. "Even with all our growth, we're still country." db