



NOW: NAPA NEXT: PASO ROBLES

Some of the roads around Paso Robles, California, just north of San Luis Obispo, are so beautiful that there's actually a car commercial season here. But only a professional driver on a closed course could possibly stay focused on the black-top. The wineries, which range from extremely fancy to winsomely down-home, are the best reason to visit the area, and if you like full, rich wines, you'll be well rewarded. Rhône varietals excel, as does Zinfandel. A good place to start is **Tablas Creek Vineyard** (9339 Adelaida Road; 805-237-1231), a pioneer in the area. The vines were brought over from Château de Beaucastel, which is one of the Rhône's top producers. The greenhouses where most of the best Syrah, Grenache, Roussanne, and Marsanne in these parts originated have recently been turned over to **Windrose Farm**, a fantastic grower of organic produce that also operates a farm stand on the property. At the opposite end of the spectrum -- a warehouse in an industrial park -- **Garretson Wine Company** makes oddly named but delicious wines (a glass of Spainneach, perhaps?). If you prefer one-stop wine tasting, stroll into **Vinoteca Wine Bar** (835 12th Street, 805-227-7154), across from the nearly five-acre Paso Robles City Park. Order a glass of Tassajara rosé or some other locally made wine, and if there are a few Stetsons lying around, that's a sure sign there's a cowboy-friendly event going on over at the Mid-State Fairgrounds. So don't be surprised if the person who crafted the wine you're drinking is chatting with a champion calf-roper. This mix of cultures is the essence of Paso Robles.

-- James Rodewald