

THE BEST VINEYARDS OF PASO ROBLES

BY EMMANUEL LUPE

Halfway between the two main California metropolises of Los Angeles and San Francisco lies Paso Robles wine country. Located along California's famed Central Coast, the Paso Robles wine grape growing region's climate is perfect for the production of award-winning premium wines. A long growing season of warm days and cool evenings give rise to vibrantly ripened fruit with dynamic flavor profiles that translate beautifully in your glass of Paso Robles wine. Traversing the landscape, you will find 26,000 vineyard acres, producing more than 40 wine grape varieties - from Spanish to Italian and Bordeaux to Rhône, including the area's heritage variety Zinfandel. The distinct microclimates and soils, combined with warm days and cool nights, make growing conditions ideal for producing these diverse styles of wine.

Paso Robles was named for its local oak trees, El Paso de Robles, or "The Pass of the Oaks." The name was recorded in 1828 as a rancho where the padres of San Miguel sowed wheat, and the city was founded on the rancho in 1886 and incorporated in 1889. Today the city's name is commonly shortened to Paso Robles. The Paso Robles American Viticultural Appellation (AVA) is home to more than 180 wineries. In the June 30, 2005 issue of *Wine Advocate*, Robert M. Parker, Jr. asserts "there is no question that a decade from now, the top viticultural areas of Santa Barbara, Santa Rita Hills and the limestone hillsides west of Paso Robles will be as well known as the glamorous vineyards of Napa Valley."

Among all the vineyards, it was difficult to select the top five of Paso Robles, but after several visits to the area and meetings with the winemakers, looking at their wineries, terroirs, and of course tasting their most famous vintages, we came up with a list of five vineyards.

#1: L'AVENTURE: Five years after his first 98 ratings by Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate* for his 2004 L'Aventure Red Estate Cuvée, Asseo continues to go from strength to strength, producing a fabulous portfolio of wines that makes L'Aventure one of the bright, shining reference points for the region. This is one of the California Central Coast Superstars, and the wines are worth every cent.





Stephan Asseo, owner and winemaker at L'Aventure Winery, began making wine in 1982, following his education at L'Ecole Oenologique de Macon, Burgundy, France. In that same year, Stephan established Domaine Courteillac in Bordeaux. He and his family later purchased Chateau Fleur Cardinal, Saint-Emilion Grand Cru, and Chateau Robin, in the Cotes de Castillon, Bordeaux. Over the next 15 years, Stephan developed into an artisan winemaker of fastidious craftsmanship, and gained a reputation as a maverick vigneron. However, his true desire was to be more innovative than AOC law would allow.

In 1996, this led him on a quest for a great terroir, where he could pursue his ideal as a winemaker. After searching for over a year among the world's great wine fields, ranging from South Africa to Lebanon, and Argentina to Napa, Stephan found Paso Robles. Stephan immediately "fell in love" with the unique terroir. All L'Aventure vineyards are located on the western side of Highway 101. The rolling topography of the Santa Lucia Mountain Range, the deep calcareous soils, and the maritime influence of the renowned Templeton Gap, all combine to produce a world class wine country, with the potential to craft some of the world's greatest blends. It is here, in Paso Robles, that Stephan began his adventure, "L'Aventure."

In order to maximize quality in L'Aventure's harsh terroir, Stephan has established a high density plantation scheme of 2,100

vines per acre. A meticulous regimen of leaf pulling, shoot thinning, and cluster dropping result in benchmark yields of two to two and a half tons per acre. This equates to one bottle of wine per vine. In addition, Stephan's drive for fully mature fruit allows the grapes to fully express their character in the form of intense, concentrated wines. After the painstaking labor in the vineyard, quality selection is continued by hand sorting the grape bunches as they come in. The grapes are then destemmed and vinified in small lots to maintain the integrity of each source or parcel. Thermostatic control enables them to manage premaceration and fermentation flawlessly, with silky, rich wines as the result. Furthermore, aging in French oak, and a minimal racking program contribute much to Stephan's artisan, handcrafted style.

The spirit of L'Aventure is most evident in Stephan's "Paso blends" such as Optimus and Estate Cuvée. Both wines are Cabernet Sauvignon/Syrah blends. In these wines, as well as in the Rhône blend Côte à Côte, the blending of premium varietals increases the authenticity, complexity, and balance of the wines. In this adventurous spirit is found the future of Paso Robles wines...great, balanced red blends. The winery reflects L'Aventure's commitment to excellence. All of the equipment is state of the art, a perfect blend between technology and tradition. In the spirit of sustainable agriculture, L'Aventure winery runs on solar power installed by Premier Power.



#2: SAXUM VINEYARDS: In 1998, when 28-year-old Justin Smith started making wine in Paso Robles, it was a sleepy Central Coast area. Now the wine region is one of California's fastest-growing. West Paso has a magical combination of rocky limestone soils, rolling hillsides and a not-too-cool climate that gives red Rhône varieties a firm structure to frame their rich, dark berry flavors. Smith, who owns the 3,000-case Saxum winery with his wife Heather, creates wines of distinctive character, depth and personality.

In 2007, with a near-perfect vintage, Saxum's wines reached new heights. In 2010, the 07 Saxum James Berry Vineyard received a 98 rating by the Wine Spectator who elected Saxum its #1 Wine of the year among the top 100 selected wines. Saxum Vineyards is focused on producing Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvedre-based blends from the Templeton Gap/Willow Creek area of Paso Robles. Saxum lets their rocky calcareous soils, steep hillsides, sunny days, and cooling ocean breezes speak through their wines by keeping their yields low, picking the fruit at the peak of ripeness, and using a minimalist approach in the cellar. They respect their land and farm everything sustainably without chemical fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides. Because Saxum's vine's roots penetrate deep through the fissures in the calcareous soil, irrigation is rarely needed. Production is kept at 2200-2800 cases a year divided between six different cuvees: Broken Stones, James Berry Vineyard, Bone Rock, Booker Vineyards, Paderewski Vineyard and Heart Stone Vineyard.



The James Berry Vineyard is the Smith family's estate vineyard. It is located 10 miles from the Pacific Ocean with an average elevation of 1200 feet.

#3: WINDWARD VINEYARD: Pinot Noir is the driving passion of Marc Goldberg and Maggie D'Ambrosia, husband and wife owners of Windward Vineyard. Windward Vineyard is dedicated exclusively to producing Burgundian style Pinot Noir. To make the "Great American Pinot Noir," one that rivals those produced in Burgundy, is the couple's passion.

Marc and Maggie purchased and planted the vineyard in 1989 based upon the terroir and microclimate of the Paso Robles west side. The combination of the cooling Pacific breezes, the calcareous soil and the 50 degree daily drop in temperature produce exemplary Pinot Noir. With the Burgundian French term, "Monopole" vision of total control over both the vineyard and the winemaking, the 15-acre vineyard is planted with four notable French clones.

Windward Vineyard is dedicated to putting Paso Robles' Pinot Noir back on the map. Since the 1993 debut in 1995, each of Windward's SOLD OUT vintages have achieved inspiring acclaim, particularly within the community of wine aficionados who appreciate the layered complexity of Burgundian-styled Pinot Noir.

#4: TABLAS CREEK VINEYARD: Tablas Creek Vineyard is the result of a decades-long friendship between the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel and Robert Haas, longtime importer and founder of Vineyard Brands. The families created a partnership in 1985 and in 1989 purchased a 120-acre property in the hilly Las Tablas district of west Paso Robles for its similarities to Châteauneuf du



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Pape: limestone soils, a favorable climate, and rugged terrain. The partners imported the traditional varietals grown on the Perrins’ celebrated estate, including Mourvèdre, Grenache Noir, Syrah, and Cunoise for reds; and Roussanne, Viognier, Marsanne, and Grenache Blanc for whites. These imported vines passed a rigorous 3-year USDA testing program, were propagated and grafted in the on-site nursery, and used to plant the organic estate vineyard.

Tablas Creek’s wine production is centered on their limestone-rich 120-acre organic estate vineyard. The warm days and cool nights allow Tablas Creek’s vines to gracefully ripen the Rhône

wines. Each varietal is hand-harvested when completely ripe and fermented separately. The winemaking, including native yeast fermentation and neutral French oak barrels, preserves the wines’ ties to their soil, climate, and varietal character.

#5: LINNE CALADO: Tucked away on a private drive in a forest of oak trees and native vegetation, you will find Linne Calado Winery. The winery was established in 1998 and is family owned and operated. The winery name describes the distinctive limestone soils present on the west side of Paso Robles where all of the grapes

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varietals they grow. Tablas Creek vineyard practices emphasize dry farming and seek to maximize the expression of their terroir. They farm organically, and received their organic certification in January 2003. More recently, Tablas Creek has converted part of the vineyard to use biodynamic techniques. At harvest, each vineyard block is hand-harvested selectively, and they typically make 2-4 passes through each vineyard block at harvest.

Tablas Creek follows the centuries-old Châteauneuf du Pape tradition of blending chosen varietals, which produces wines that are more complex, better balanced, and richer than single varietal

utilized to make the wineries’ 4,000 annual cases are grown.

All of Linne Calado’s wines are unfiltered and unfinned and balanced through the blending of Rhone and Zinfandel varieties. The Linne Calado wines are driven by sustainable farming practices and minimalist winemaking that allows them to produce wines that are rich and concentrated. Be sure to try Sticks and Stones, a blend of Grenache, Mourvedre and Syrah, which the winery is well known for.

Special thanks to Paso Robles Wine Alliance. Visit ***Pasowine.com***.