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PASO ROBLES / THE WINES

Limestone cowboys

Paso Robles' vintners are focused on Rhone-style blends and Syrahs.

By Jordan Mackay, Special to The Times

If you want to see why Paso Robles is becoming recognized as California's capital of Rhône-style wines, just take a look at the rustic stone wall in front of Tablas Creek winery. A long, towering barrier, the wall is built of white limestone boulders that, from the inception of the vineyard in 1990, have been systematically extracted from the earth to make room for the tender roots of vines.

When tamed, soil this rocky, this chalky, almost seems destined to produce good wine. And with its rugged, sun-drenched slopes, with its neatly combed rows of vineyards, this place looks like, feels like, and even tastes like the Rhône Valley.

At least that's how it struck the Perrin family of the southern Rhône's Château Beaucastel and their American importer, Robert Haas, in the late 1980s. It was then that they searched California, from Mendocino to the Sierra foothills, for the best place to make American Rhône-style blends. Syrah was already becoming popular just down the road in Santa Maria and San Luis Obispo. But once Beaucastel, a revered producer of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, gave Paso Robles its stamp of approval, others followed.

What has happened since in the region is nothing short of a boom: Acres planted under Rhône varieties jumped from fewer than 100 acres in 1994 to more than 2,000 today. During that time, at least 10 wineries focusing on Rhône varieties have been established.

Fueling the trend has been the Paso-based Hospice du Rhône, the celebration of Rhône wines that brings 3,000 enthusiasts and the A-list of Rhône producers from all over the world to this modest town every May; it's the largest celebration of Rhône wines in the world.

So why Paso Robles? "The primary concern was soils, not climate," says Haas of his search for the right terroir. "There were a lot of climates in California that would work, but we wanted limestone soils because that's what they have in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. However, limestone soils here [in California] are rare." In 1989 Haas and the Perrin family purchased a 120-acre parcel of rocky limestone hills and named it Tablas Creek for the small stream running through it.

"The olive trees, rosemary and thyme were so familiar," says Haas. In other words, so much like the Rhône.

Next came choosing grapes. From French nurseries and from Beaucastel's own vineyards, the partners began importing vine material, including Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah, Counoise, Roussanne, Viognier and Marsanne. Legally importing vines was a three-year process because the U.S. Department of Agriculture required that the vines be quarantined and tested for viruses.

Finally, Tablas Creek developed a nursery on the property to multiply enough vines to begin

filling out its vineyards. (Unexpectedly, the nursery has been a boon: The sale of imported Rhône vines to wineries all over the West Coast has become a significant part of Tablas' business.)

Nine years after purchasing the property, the partners had their first vintage in the bottle.

A great divide runs through Paso Robles: the Salinas River, which runs parallel to Highway 101, splits the region into east and west. So significant are the climate, soil and temperature differences on the two sides that in the future it will probably not be said that Tablas Creek is located in Paso Robles, but in west Paso Robles. And from that simple distinction grows a rivalry.

The white-collar west side has become the habitat for smaller, quality-oriented boutique wineries, while the blue-collar east side is home to the larger commercial, bulk-wine operations such as Meridian.

And although no one from either side ever stoops to demean the terroir of the other, behind the words of most west-side vintners lurks a quiet sense of superiority, while those on the east side argue for the legitimacy of their less spectacular terroir.

Clash of climates

East Paso Robles is flat, incredibly dry and hot. Soils are sandy, though water, thanks to an aquifer, is not a problem. The west side, on the other hand, inhabits the hilly terrain of the Santa Lucia range. Soils here are generally richer clay loams, but uplift has brought rocks and limestone to the surface. All of Paso Robles is hot, but in the west there are cooler locations because it's closer to the ocean.

And both sides benefit from the largest swing between day and night temperatures of any region in California, on average about 50 degrees.

With rainfall sometimes reaching 40 inches a year, dry farming is possible in the west. As Neil Collins, Tablas Creek's winemaker, explains, "The difference is simple: They are able to farm a higher crop level, and we can't get the yields over here. They have an aquifer and can irrigate to their heart's content." In other words, the east is naturally geared toward high production, the west to high quality. And that's generally how things have played out, though it's not the end of the story.

"If we sit back and watch, Paso Robles will sort itself out," says Collins. "It's not a matter of one side being better than the other — Paso could be two different countries." Austin Hope, a young vintner on the rise, agrees. Speaking of Syrah in particular, he says, "On the east side, it's like the Rhône meets Australia. You've got a little bit of the gaminess of the Rhône and a lot of the fruit of Australia. But the wines are not as structured as the west side's, which tend to be more elegant, structured, very pretty and focused. The west side has much heavier soils, more clay. The east side has sandier soils, better for Cabernet."

There are, of course, exceptions. As Gary Eberle, owner of Eberle winery (on the east side), says, "Just because a vineyard is on the west side doesn't make it ideal. The coolest vineyard I know in Paso is on the west side, but so is the hottest." Eberle was the first to plant Syrah in Paso Robles, in 1975. If east side growers keep their yields down and farm for quality, they've shown that they can make some wonderful wines.

In any case, the Rhône wines garnering the most critical attention are all coming from the west side. Hope, who also works east side vineyards as the winemaker for Liberty School (Cabernet) and Treana (a Cab, Merlot and Syrah blend) labels, makes an eponymous Syrah

from his family's vineyard in one of the coolest microclimates of the west side. His conviction about this site for Syrah was strong enough to motivate him to graft over 15-year-old Cabernet vines to Syrah.

"We bet the farm that we can make the best Syrah in the appellation and maybe in California," says Hope. His Syrah is a lovely example of what Paso is capable of: a rich and complex hybrid of old world and new, with a gamy and complex nose of a Rhône Syrah integrated with the plump, lovely fruit for which California is famous.

Matt Trevisan and Justin Smith are two other darlings of the Rhône movement. The two started Linne Calodo Cellars in 1997, but parted ways in 2002. Trevisan retained the rights to the Linne Calodo label, while Smith started his own, called Saxum vineyards.

Smith's Syrah, a huge wine called Bone Rock, has garnered praise for its intensity and depth. At Linne Calodo, Trevisan makes unique blends that include old-vine Zinfandel (sometimes co-fermented with Syrah), as well as a massive Grenache-Syrah-Mourvèdre blend called Sticks and Stones.

Adelaida Winery, located near Tablas Creek, has made a huge investment in its rugged Viking Vineyard, where it produces complex and focused Syrah from there. Justin Winery, located far down Chimney Rock road on the west side, is also making superb Syrah from estate-grown fruit. At L'Aventure, Frenchman Stephan Asseo makes critically acclaimed Rhône reds and whites, albeit in a decisively jammy California style. Cris Cherry is getting attention for his Villa Creek blends. And Mat Garretson, the founder of Hospice du Rhône, has received high marks for the profusion of Rhône-style wines that his Garretson Wine Co. cellars puts out.

Even while garnering critical attention, Paso Robles is still a mixed bag. Few truly transcendent Syrahs have come from Paso Robles, though estimates have it comprising 90% of Rhône variety plantings there. The vast majority of Paso's Syrahs are heavy, jammy, simple, alcoholic wines. Classical Syrah of true character and complexity has peppery and gamy notes, and much of Paso Robles may be simply too hot side to achieve that.

Even Tablas Creek, winemaker Collins admits, is on the warm end of Syrah terroir. "I love the Syrah we get here, he says, "but we picked this spot to ripen Mourvèdre, which is still unpicked when Syrah is already in the barrel." When producers identify the cooler locales, as Austin Hope and Justin Smith have, we may begin to expect Syrahs of greater character and complexity.

Promising blends

A more promising avenue for the region may be the route that Tablas Creek and a few others are following: blends. After all, this is the way of the southern Rhône, which Paso so resembles.

"We're firm believers in the blend being better," says Collins, "yet that was our entire model from the get-go." But it makes sense: If most spots are going to produce dull, flabby overripe Syrah, plant the grapes, even if they are less noble, that ripen later. A mélange of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre can offer more complexity and better balance, and usually sell for less than the expensive single-vineyard, single-variety bottlings of Syrah.

The Tablas red blends, Esprit de Beaucastel Rouge and Côte de Tablas, for instance, tend to be powerful and structured, while finding those earthy notes that make a wine alluring. The white blends, based on Roussanne, Marsanne, Viognier and Grenache Blanc, are also impressive, showing dazzling mineral character rarely found in California wines.

At Linne Calodo, Trevisan's "table wines" are actually meticulously crafted concoctions of different grapes. Most, with names like Sticks and Stones and Cherry Red, are highly concentrated, dense blends of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre (some include Zinfandel), and many have received high scores from critics.

The small-production blends from Villa Creek have achieved a loyal following among Rhône enthusiasts. The downside for producers is that American consumers, used to buying single-variety wines, are resistant to buying wines not labeled as such. "It's a tough go," says Trevisan. "People are much more likely to buy a bottle that says Syrah on it than one that says 'Red Table Wine.'" As Collins says, "Syrah is not even one of our major grapes, since it's not a huge component of most southern Rhône wines. Still, we've joked that when listing the varieties on the front label, if we were to print 'Syrah' twice as big as all the others, we'd have an easier time selling the wine."

Whether with Syrahs or blends, the consensus is that the best is yet to come. "I think Paso is going to be spectacular in 10 years," says vintner Eberle. "The problem we have right now — and it's not a problem — is that we've had an explosion of labels in the last three years. A lot of the wines are first releases." Furthermore, Eberle cites inconsistency as Paso's hobgoblin. Since 1983 only two wineries have had continuous ownership, he says, and in the last six years one-third of the wineries have changed hands.

As with any young boom situation, there will be a surfeit of wines, both great and not so great, to sort through until the best wines show themselves year after year. For Paso Robles, though, such consistency no longer is a question of if, but when.