



Tablas Creek proprietor Jason Haas calls Vaccarèse “a great blending grape.”

Finding Its Niche

A RARITY IN THE RHÔNE, VACCARÈSE IS SHOWING PROMISE IN PASO ROBLES

by Cindy Rynning

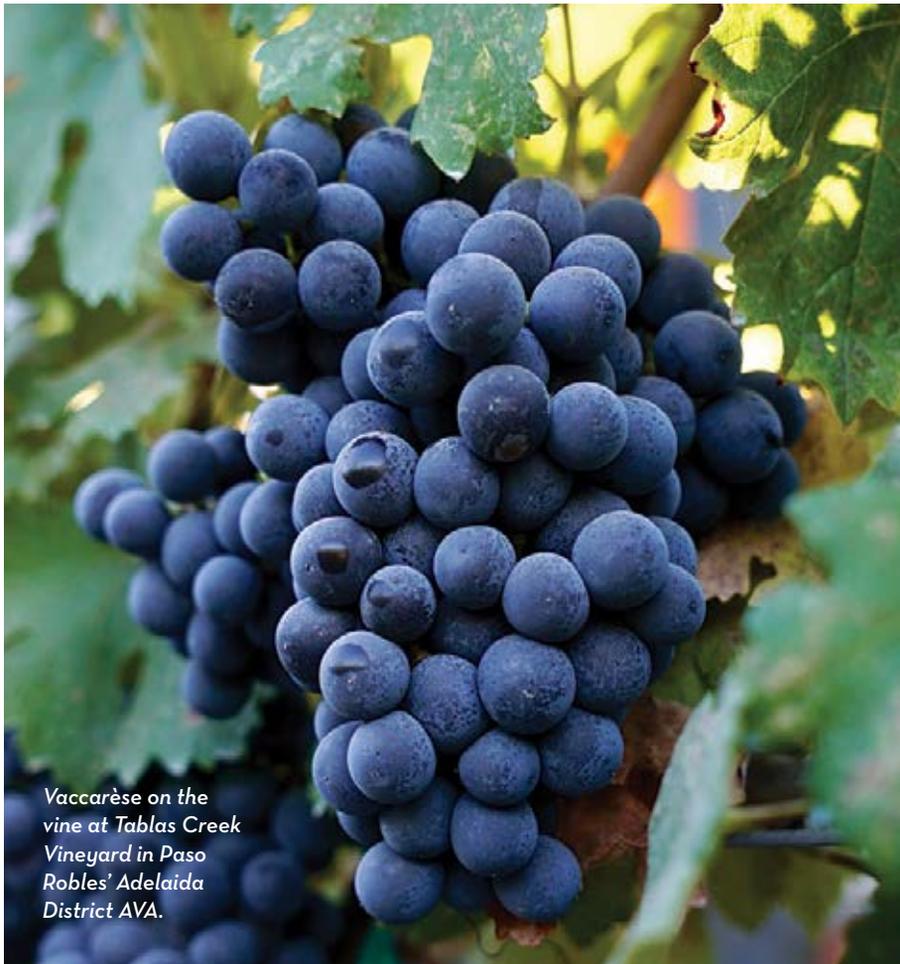
CULTIVATED IN SCANT amounts in the Rhône Valley, Vaccarèse is one of the 13 red grape varieties allowed in Châteauneuf-du-Pape blends. It's barely known in the New World—with the exception of Paso Robles, California, where this intriguing grape has found a home. Thanks to the *tout est permis* (“anything goes”) attitude of skilled winemakers in the region, not to mention the optimal climate, Vaccarèse is thriving—and a handful of wineries are showcasing it in single-varietal bottlings or adding it to blends.

Also known as Brun Argenté or Camarèse, Vaccarèse was first mentioned in historical documents dating back to 1538 in Saint-Saturnin-lès-Avignon; other writings suggest that the area around Avignon was its birthplace. It's known as Vaccarèse

in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, while the name Camarèse is specific to the Côtes-du-Rhône village of Chusclan in the Gard department. Cultivated on just 10 acres in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Vaccarèse covers barely 0.3% of the region's acreage under vine and is rarely used. In the entirety of France, only 28 acres of Vaccarèse were identified as of 2016. Yet with its fresh and floral aromatics, it may also be blended with Grenache in the rosé wines of the Côtes-du-Rhône.

In the Rhône Valley, Vaccarèse forms rather compact bunches of large, blue-black berries that are highly susceptible to downy mildew and botrytis. Producing a lighter-bodied wine with juicy aromas and flavors of red and black berries; savory, earthy notes; and moderate acidity, it is





Vaccarèse on the vine at Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles' Adelaida District AVA.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TABLAS CREEK VINEYARD

in the Willow Creek AVA, I am now a devotee and look forward to trying more from other producers. My companions at that tasting were interested enough to try a few sips with me, but their comments were mixed.

That doesn't surprise Volatus owner/winemaker Hal Schmitt, who says, "People either like it or don't. It's unusual, and most need to sip this wine with food." Agrees Hartenberger, "It has been a very niche wine for me and my customers. It is definitely a taste that needs getting used to. It took [my version] almost a year to relax in the bottle and show its true colors! I see it popular with people who like harder-to-find varietals like Petit Verdot and Counoise. Your traditional Chardonnay and Cabernet drinkers probably won't find it as appealing."

Sherman Thacher, owner of Thacher Winery also in Willow Creek AVA, suggests that it's just a matter of time. "Guests seem to start with intrigue when introduced to it but end with enthusiastic remarks," he says, adding, "Vaccarèse gets blended into our Constant Variable, which is our Southern Rhône-inspired blend, but we have also made it [as a] single varietal. It brings texture, rich fruit, and a unique iron characteristic. It's notable for its seeds, which require us to be extra careful when pressing. If you are a fan of . . . Rhône-style wines, this is a newer addition to California winemaking."

Though "only the very geekiest Rhône-loving consumer is even aware of it, let alone looking for it," says Haas, he has hopes for its future. "It is a great blending grape because of its unique position among Rhône reds in having black fruit and high acid," he points out. "So at the very least I think that winemakers will be happy to have it. [And] if we make enough compelling varietal examples, [consumer interest] will come. But it's so new still that everyone is at the discovery stage, including us."

Though its appeal may not be universal, Vaccarèse has an unforgettable taste and an interesting story while serving as a challenge to wine drinkers to open our minds and expand our palates. S

often compared to Counoise or Cinsault, though its tannic structure and notes of spice and pepper also earn it comparisons to Syrah.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the world, Vaccarèse is even more scarce. So why does it flourish in Paso Robles?

Jason Haas, second-generation proprietor of Tablas Creek Vineyard in the Adelaida District AVA, has an answer: "Vaccarèse apparently only became rare in France because it was susceptible to powdery mildew, not because of any issues with its flavors or vigor," he explains. "In the Paso Robles climate, mildew isn't really an issue, so that's one huge mark in our favor. Beyond that, it's one of the rare red grapes that is black-fruited and high [in] acid. The calcareous soils and the cold nights here combine to further bolster that acidity and allow us to leave it on the vine even a little longer."

Rich Hartenberger, owner and winemaker at Midnight Cellars in the Willow Creek District AVA, agrees: "Vaccarèse does well here due to the much-discussed similarities to Châteauneuf-du-

Pape, specifically our soils and climate. While our growing seasons with regards to rainfall and its duration differ, they are similar enough to yield comparable fruit quality and flavors if farmed similarly."

Granted, both Haas and Hartenberger admit that they have never tried a single-varietal bottling of Vaccarèse from France due to its rarity. What's more, says Haas, "Other than saying 'it is prone to mildew, I haven't been able to get any advice from our French partners on what it's like over there. So we're working largely without a map. . . . I tell the story on our Tablas Creek blog about trying a 90% Vaccarèse from Châteauneuf alongside our first-ever bottling. I found the Châteauneuf to be softer and more chocolaty, while ours was crunchier and more about fruit, tannin, and acid."

Having tried Vaccarèse for the first time at Volatus

