

## PREMIUM

# Paso Robles: California's quintessential yet eclectic wine region

If there's one word to sum up California's Paso Robles AVA it's diversity, says Clare Tooley MW, who finds an exciting array of grape varieties, appellations, vineyards, soil types and family-oriented wineries in this must-visit region.

Clare Tooley MW

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# Scroll down for Clare Tooley MW's tasting notes and scores of 24 top wines from six premium Paso Robles producers

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## Paso Robles AVA: the facts

Established in 1983, the Paso Robles AVA now has 11 sub appellations. It is the fastest-growing wine region in California, with more than 200 wineries and 16,200ha. Over 60 different grape varieties grow in its Mediterranean climate, which also experiences the greatest diurnal temperature swing of all California's wine-growing regions.

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Whichever aspect most appeals to you, Paso Robles is unequivocally a must-visit **California** wine region. Equidistant from **San Francisco** and **Los Angeles**, Paso offers the **road-tripping wine lover** a convenient resting place. Its premium wines to some extent also mirror this half-way point between the structured Cabernet and Bordeaux blends of Napa and Sonoma and the sun-loving plusher styles of the south.

Far from being binary however, Paso offers the quality wine lover the most eclectic experience on the **Central Coast**. Rhône reds of **Grenache** and **Syrah** rub shoulders with Italian and Spanish grapes while old-vine **Zinfandel** greets powerful **Cabernets**.

Diverse whites such as **Fiano** (Giornata – 'Inspired by Italy, crafted in California') and **Chenin Blanc** (Thacher) flourish here. As do the bevy of southern French grapes including Roussanne, Grenache Blanc, Picpoul Blanc, Picardan and Clairette Blanche (Tablas Creek).

## Sites, soils and sub-appellations

The Salinas River, shadowed by the 101 Interstate, provides a natural east-west divide, with rolling hills to the east and steeper terrain to the west. But just as the Right Bank/Left Bank denomination offers too simplistic an explanation of **Bordeaux's** rich complexity, so an East/West categorisation does little justice to Paso's diversity.

The region is racing to cut itself into smaller pieces from within. No fewer than 11 sub-appellations have been approved since the general Paso Robles AVA was established in 1983.

Epoch Wines' mission statement is clear and echoes others who have invested in the region. 'We loved wines from **Rhône** varieties and, being geologists, we understood the importance terroir plays in making world-class wines.'



Old-vine, dry-farmed Zinfandel in the Dusi vineyard, planted in 1923.

It continues: ‘Upon extensive research and travel, we kept coming back to Paso Robles for the weather, unique soils, hilliness and extreme temperature swings that are known to this region and found within each of our vineyard sites.’

Site specification is key within this vast region, essential to its potential quality. But such specification never happens overnight. It takes time to map a region where more than 30 different soil series exist; still longer to establish-site specific vineyards that are just the right kind for quality production.

Furthermore, a region as drought-prone as Paso requires even greater understanding of the options, plus ongoing exploration of sustainability. The choice of rootstocks or own-rooted as per Thacher’s Shell Creek Vineyard Chenin Blanc, row spacing, clonal selection, irrigation techniques and the ability to dry-farm, are just a few of the ongoing areas of research and trial.

## Highlighting single vineyards

The myriad grape varieties planted in Paso pay tribute to the region’s geological diversity as well as its cultural multiformity. Ideal for both grape growers’ and wine lovers’ curiosity and ambition.

So is the wine industry’s conscience, as the commitment to organic practices, regenerative farming and water management will ensure survival. It’s a sad but fundamental truth that while Paso may have chosen to emulate classic European wine regions to gain a foothold in the market, it will end up providing a blueprint for many more facing the challenges of global warming.

The search for terroir was underway long before authorities rubber-stamped the appellation. Wine grapes joined orchards and nut crops generations ago. **Zinfandel**, for example, was planted in Paso in the 19th century.



Adelaida's HMR Vineyard, planted in the 1970s, is the oldest Pinot Noir-producing vineyard on California's Central Coast.

Named single vineyards, rather than winemakers, feature on the labels of many of Paso's highest-quality wines. The eponymously owned Dusi vineyard, planted in 1923, is home to old-vine **Zinfandel**, sought after by such luminary producers as Turley and Ridge.

Adelaida's HMR vineyard, planted in the 1970s, is the oldest **Pinot Noir**-producing vineyard on the Central Coast, cited by André Tchelistcheff as 'a jewel of ecological elements'. Its 2019 Pinot (see tasting note) immediately seduces and explodes with flavour.

Thacher planted two vineyards in the sub-AVAs of Adelaida District and Willow Creek but also sources from and names the vineyards of Glenrose, Shell Creek, Coast View, La Vista and Will's Hill. Tablas Creek cites no fewer than 12 vineyards for its Esprit and Patelin blends (Derby, Fralich, Tablas Creek, Creston Ridge, Dawson Creek, M du R, Hollyhock, Self Family, Velo, Clautiere, Cass and KamRidge). Epoch's resonant Grenache and Syrah wines, from winemaker Jordan Fiorentini, hail from the Paderewski vineyard.

## Family affair

Soil is fundamental to great wine production. But the less tangible (though no less visceral) desire to achieve legacy is often evident wherever great wine is made. Paso Robles has many such legacy builders – even if their feet and vines are firmly planted in the dirt.

The **Haas** and **Perrin** family partnership of Tablas Creek is a good example of personal and practical ambition. With an adamant belief it was possible, they created something extraordinary.

Their search was specific: an environment to mirror the southern Rhône. They settled on the calcareous shale in the West Side hills and began to plant. Partner and general manager Jason Haas, son of **Robert Haas**, the founder, frequently writes in his winery blog of the precedence regionality takes over winemaking. Dirt, wind and drought conditions govern cellar manipulation, the latter a tool to mirror, not mitigate.



Thacher is one of many in family-run wineries in Paso Robles.

Paso is a family-oriented, family-friendly place. Cowboys and children are particularly welcome here. The Paso Wine Country Alliance website is full of links to join in local celebrations, festivities, gatherings and opportunities for memory-making camaraderie.

Many drawn to its wine production have made it a family affair, with the 'small winery' phenomenon of 1970s California typifying Paso to this day. Thacher, Giornata and Torrin are all husband-and-wife teams bringing up the next generation of Paso people and making wines that speak to both their origin and their audience.

My tasting notes that follow, from a handful of Paso's premium estates, reveal beauty, quality and wines well worth seeking out, sharing and cellaring. They do not, however, do justice to the region's real laid-back, human side that encourages you to chill in its sultry heat. For that, you will just have to come and see for yourself.

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## Paso Robles: 24 top wines from six premium producers



## Thacher, Shell Creek Vineyards Chenin Blanc, Paso Robles, California, USA 2019

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Full-on Chenin Blanc nose of gently bruised Russet apples, apple Charlotte and wet fern. In the mouth the intensity of flavours gather and grow. Fills the palate to absolute capacity and spills over to a rush of wonderful Chenin acidity through the finish and long after the wine has...

Points 95



## Epoch, White, Willow Creek, Paso Robles, California, USA 2020

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Zesty fresh meadow flower nose. The palate is so pretty – absolutely packed full of different white fruit flavours, as well as white florals, acacia honey and camomile, but the intensity does not hit you at first. The initial impression is light, summery and feathery and then suddenly...

Points 94

## Tablas Creek, Esprit Blanc de Tablas, Paso Robles, California, USA 2018

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Compelling aromas of golden fruit, dairy cream, fresh vanilla and pastries. Palate is much less about cake and more about stone: both stone fruit (apricot, from the Roussanne) and pebbles.



Has a lovely riverine freshness. Green apple acidity and phenolics 'spark' the mid-palate and...

Points 94



Giornata, Fiano, Paso Robles, California, USA 2020

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Expressive ripe yellow fruited nose of peach, apricot and honeysuckle. Immensely appealing stoniness too. The palate explodes with both tropical fruit and mineral intensity – real fireworks! Lovely stony core surrounded by pineapple and mango flavours – intense and...

Points 93

Tablas Creek, Patelin de Tablas Blanc, Paso Robles, California, USA 2019

Immediately appealing, intriguing nose of warm peach fruit, exotic florals, orange fruit and blossom. Palate is soft, luscious and ripe fruited (orange and lemon, peach and mango), acidity is only gently supportive of the weight of the fruit basket that spreads across the palate. There is nevertheless a vibrancy that...

Points 90



### Epoch, Rosé, Willow Creek, Paso Robles, California, USA 2020

Pale onion skin pink that belies a meaty Mourvèdre nose. The fruit, however, comes rushing in on the palate – all pink grapefruit, peach, nectarine and lemongrass. There's lovely freshness but nothing half-hearted or trivial. The grape varieties have left quite an impression despite...

Points 92



### Epoch, Paderewski Vineyard Block B, Willow Creek, Paso Robles, California, USA 2017

Tar, rosemary, dark berry, fig, liquorice and violets all hit the nose at the same time. Deeply aromatic and compelling. The palate is rich, concentrated and textured, with layers of gorgeously ripe, plush dark berry fruits. Cream and baking spices too. A really charming, gourmand Syrah showing no hint of...



Points 96



**Epoch, Paderewski Vineyard Sensibility, Willow Creek, Paso Robles, California, USA 2017**

Highly perfumed expressive aromas of crushed strawberry, cherry, cola and just the faintest suggestion of citrus and mint. The palate is equally layered and appealing with the flavours following the nose and the acidity just high enough to support the fruit banquet. The texture i...

Points 96



**Adelaida, HMR Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir, Adelaida District, Paso Robles, California, USA 2019**

Gorgeously scented Pinot Noir! All roses, rosehip, raspberry and candied cherry. In the mouth the wine is succulent and densely packed with soft, gummy fruit flavours. Headily scented with roses and thyme, the flavours and aromas pursue the finish which is long and silky. This is lovely New World Pinot...



Points 95



### Epoch, Paderewski Vineyard Ingenuity, Willow Creek, Paso Robles, California, USA 2017

Refreshing citrus and mint aromas at first, then blackcurrant, spice and nutmeg oak. Intriguing! The palate is equally refreshing on entry: full of minty, pure-fruited, dark berries and currants, then raisins and chocolate nibs. Maturation in French oak is apparent though i...

Points 95

### Torrin, Tsundere, Willow Creek, Paso Robles, California, USA 2018

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Treacle and gingerbread cake nose, ripe figs and liquorice – immediately gourmand. The palate is more complex though: intriguing fruit flavours (damson, cassis) marry liquorice and bitter

chocolate and are held together by firm Tannat tannins that don't relent even on the finish,...

Points 94



### Adelaida, Anna's Estate Vineyard Syrah, Adelaida District, Paso Robles, California, USA 2018

Full-throttle Syrah aromas of black fruit, plum, fig and cassis. The palate is equally indulgent, with masses of ripe black fruit mashed and meshed together to form a weighty, clay-like structure; soft pudding fruit with tannins that trickle through rather than tighten. No corset o...

Points 93



### Adelaida, Viking Estate Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Adelaida District, Paso Robles, California, USA 2018

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Redolent blackcurrant aromas with just enough of that Cabernet green leaf edge to keep it



vinous and adult. The palate is full bodied, richly fruited, sweet-cored, concentrated and warming, with super-ripe hugging tannins. The acidity is enough to lift the mid palate and...

Points 93



**Giornata, French Camp Vineyard Aglianico, Paso Robles, California, USA 2019**

Expressive aromas of red plum and cherry but cut through with a stoniness and ferrous quality. The flavours start broad and dark fruited but soon intensify in impact as the fruit tannins and acidity kick in and envelop the mouth. It is these structural elements that take over and drive...

Points 93

**Tablas Creek, Esprit de Tablas, Adelaida District, Paso Robles, California, USA 2018**

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Subtle, restrained nose of fresh herbs (dill) and black pepper, mouthwateringly savoury. It starts off beautifully smooth on the palate before the tannins start gently to tug and the

flavours appear more like perfume (floral, rosehip, bergamot) than actual fruit flavours. The...

Points 93



### Thacher, Original Copy, Adelaida District, Paso Robles, California, USA 2017

Wonderfully aromatic Cabernet influence on the nose – all figgy pudding, raisin, nutmeg oak spice and toasted brown bread. The palate is remarkably supple: the tannins are ripe, sinewy and supportive yet flexible, encasing a rich, ripe dark fruit compote. The wine will continue t...

Points 93



### Epoch, Veracity, Willow Creek, Paso Robles, California, USA 2017

Grilled meat, rosemary and thyme aromas then firm, polished, savoury and intense flavours. Tannins are tightly woven, acidity is firm and there is a real stoniness to this wine. Showing brooding charm, it needs time to unwind and uncoil but there's no doubting its compact complexity of flavours that encompass...

Points 92



### Tablas Creek, Patelin de Tablas, Paso Robles, California, USA 2019

Distinctive morello cherry nose with a lick of Christmas spice, cinnamon and nutmeg. The wine is vibrant when it hits the mid palate, with plenty of cherry fruit flavours, but this time with added currant and cranberry. Ripe but with a definite savoury aura that makes it...

Points 92



### Thacher, Glenrose Vineyard Cinsault, Adelaida District, Paso Robles, California, USA 2019

Strawberry compote aromas with camphor, nettle and root tea undertones. In the mouth it is limpid, light in weight but heavy in red berry fruit content. Tea-like tannins become more overt in the aftertaste leaving a distinctly savoury impression, despite the luscious red pulp flavours. The finish is surprisingly long...



Points 92



### Giornata, Barbera, Paso Robles, California, USA 2020

Subtle, ripe and dark red cherry fruit nose with a hint of baking spice, all quite contained and brooding right now. The palate comes to life with a burst of red berry fruit and that signature bright acidity that lifts the whole and sends it rushing around the mouth, craving...

Points 91

### Torrin, Banshee, Willow Creek, Paso Robles, California, USA 2018

Attractive aromas of both fruit and fresh flowers. Oatmeal too. The palate brims with black and red currant flavours and a fruit acidity that cuts through the higher alcohol and distracts the taster with an impression of vibrancy and lift. There is nothing heavy about this wine: the Grenache red...

Points 91



**Giornata, Luna Matta Vineyard Nebbiolo, Paso Robles, California, USA 2018**

Compelling and subtle old rose aromas with a hint of blood. Palate is intensely savoury and ferrous; driven and vibrant as all Giornata's wines. The intensity of flavours continues throughout the palate, not letting up for one moment. This demands food and would enliven...

Points 90



**Giornata, Sangiovese, Paso Robles, California, USA 2018**

Lovely strawberry perfume together with tomato leaf, fresh oregano and pepper. The palate is lively from a high acidity that nevertheless is tempered by ripe red berry flavours and an engaging savoury lick of oak spice. The finish is long, succulent and very Tuscan. A vivacious wine, light on its...



Points 90



### Giornata, Il Campo Rosso, Paso Robles, California, USA 2019

Warm rich turned earth aroma, like bright red fruit warmed by the sun. In the mouth the wine is all sweet ripe fruit with a bite to the acidity that lifts and refreshes. Cranberry, cherry and pomegranate all come through on the palate but the finish is savoury-edged. This is...

Points 89



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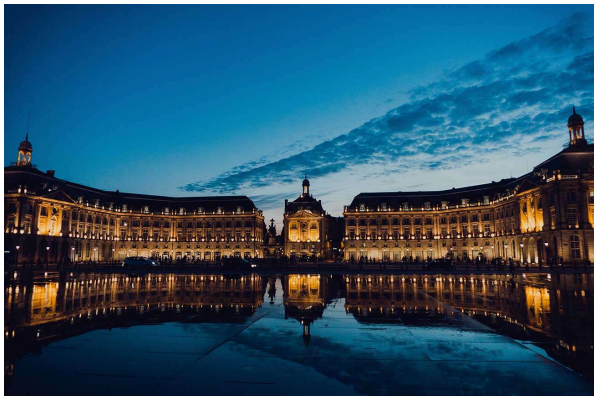
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