

# PASO ROBLES 2.0



from left: Brian and Stephy Terrizzi, Jason Haas, Jerry Lohr, David Osgood;  
background: fractured limestone at Luna Matta Vineyard

I like the way Stephy Terrizzi drives.

With a pruning crew pickup blocking our route across Luna Matta Vineyard, she grins, pulls a sharp left and guns her weathered SUV up a slope between two rows of nebbiolo. It's hard to believe that this is the same person who put in a sage garden to apologize for spraying an organic pesticide on vines infested with leafhoppers.

On the far side of the vineyard, Terrizzi floors it again, then parks at a lookout above a dramatic bowl-shaped valley, where nebbiolo, sangiovese and aglianico vines coexist with stands of live oak and 40 acres of walnuts. It's as if you traversed the entire boot of Italy in a single vineyard. From a viticultural perspective, it shouldn't be possible for all these grapes to succeed on the same site, but here they are.

Walking between the steep rows of vines, I ask how deep the topsoil is up here. The answer: about four inches. "Or sometimes, like none," Terrizzi says, pointing out a ledge of calcareous shale jutting out from the hillside. "When we're picking this block, you have to be careful, because your picking bin will start to slide when your back is turned."

Luna Matta's proximity to the Templeton Gap, a low trough in the Santa Lucia range that brings cold air in from the Pacific, means that it's a relatively cool site. Even so, the

by Luke Sykora

Jason Haas by Alex Wong; Brian and Stephy Terrizzi and Luna Matta stones by Drew Kelly









temperature swings can be dramatic. Terrizzi observes that late in the morning, the temperature can spike 35 degrees in half an hour. "You'll be out in the vineyard in the middle of the morning in a sweatshirt, and all of a sudden you're just shedding clothes," she says. But temperatures above 100 degrees rarely last for long. The influx of cold marine air in the late afternoon is often so sudden that it can almost feel like a solid mass.

Back down at the base of the vineyard, Terrizzi's husband, Brian, pours a collection of the wines he and others have made from Luna Matta fruit. His own *Giornata 2007 Nebbiolo* is lively, acid driven and lean. Picked at 23 degrees Brix, the wine clocks in at about 14 percent alcohol. As we spit into the gravel parking lot, the floral, bright, raspberry-fruited wine reminds me of a conversation I had before leaving San Francisco. Ian Becker of Arlequin Wine Merchants had commented: "Up until a few years ago, wines from Paso Robles were typically thought to be very big and extracted, and that somehow, that was indicative of terroir." The game is clearly changing.

"When we talk about how we ended up in Paso Robles," Brian Terrizzi says, "it all comes down to the soil." Fresh out of enol-

were rare in California. But Brian and Stephy persevered, tracking down nebbiolo plantings through a nursery in Santa Rosa. They didn't have to cover too much ground: A mere three vineyards had purchased nebbiolo cuttings.

One of those vineyards was Luna Matta. When they arrived there, the Terrizzis were astonished. The soils, a mixture of calcareous rock and heavy clay, "are almost identical to what you find in Barolo," Stephy says. They approached Luna Matta's owners, and were told that they were welcome to the nebbiolo. Nobody else wanted it.

Five years later, Stephy is Luna Matta's vineyard manager, and multiple clients are knocking at her door to get their annual nebbiolo allocation.

**The calcareous, limestone-studded slopes** of western Paso Robles often draw the immediate attention of visitors from the north. When Chris Deegan, sommelier at San Francisco's *\*Nopa*,† visited Paso Robles last year, he was amazed by the steep vineyards, which were sometimes little more than raw ledges of limestone. "I was kind of blown away," he says. "Especially by the terrain. My idea of the potential of that place—the roof was blown off." Like the Monte Bello ridge in the

anomaly. Situated in the middle of a working cattle ranch, the 900-acre Margarita Vineyard was planted for Mondavi in 2000 and 2001 under a long-term lease. (If you want to get technical, the property's first vines were planted in 1774 by Franciscan missionaries—some remnant Mission vines were discovered in a creek bed, and cuttings have been propagated for an experimental heritage block.) With Mondavi's sale to Constellation Brands in 2005, the vines ended up back in the hands of three families who own the ranch; they have since started their own label, Ancient Peaks.

It's a big vineyard, but an effort was made to make its environmental imprint as minimal as possible. The vineyard project restored historic wetlands, included wildlife corridors and large unplanted setbacks and left old oak trees standing where vines could have plowed right through. Now, along with the occasional cow, huge flocks of wild turkeys saunter through the vineyards, and we spot a troop of wild boar feeding near the road.

This is one of Paso Robles' coolest spots. The Pacific Ocean lies just 14 miles beyond the Santa Lucia range that looms south of the ranch, and a gap carved in the hills by Trout Creek leads cold marine air to the vines. "A lot of times, we can be twelve to fifteen degrees cooler than most of the rest of Paso," says Mike Snyder, winemaker for Ancient Peaks, who finds he can harvest mature fruit with high levels of acidity at potential alcohols of 14 percent. The vineyard, located on the Sur-Nacimiento fault, includes blocks of vines on virtually bare shale. There are others on prehistoric marine sand, volcanic rock, decomposed granite and glacial deposits.

The most interesting piece of land here is Oyster Ridge, perhaps the most dramatically calcareous chunk of earth in the entire state. It's literally a ridge of fossilized oyster shells, some the size of dinner plates. This geological formation is believed to have formed in a shallow ocean basin some seven to ten million years ago. The soil is eerily pale. "In the summer, when the gophers are digging out there, you'll get these piles of white stuff," says Snyder. "For a second, you think you're looking at little igloos."

Under an old oak tree next to the new barn, the staff has collected some of the more striking things they've unearthed here: ornate fossilized scallops and heavy stone mortar and pestles that the area's early

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***"When we talk about how we ended up in Paso Robles...it all comes down to the soil."***  
—***Brian Terrizzi***

ogy school at Fresno State and inspired by a recent trip to Italy's Piedmont, he and Stephy wanted to find a corner of California where they could work with nebbiolo. When Brian shared their enthusiasm with a respected winemaker, the response was lukewarm. "He said that if we wanted to make decent nebbiolo, we would have to buy a plane ticket to Italy," Stephy recalls.

The problem was calcium, or more specifically, California's lack of it. One of the distinctions of the Barolo and Barbaresco hills, and particularly of some of their most sought-after sites, is calcium-rich clay, and conventional wisdom held that these soils

Santa Cruz Mountains, the coastal range of western Paso Robles was formed as the Pacific plate pushed against the continent, lifting ancient ocean sediment a thousand or more feet above sea level.

"People tend to focus on the Westside," says Brian Terrizzi, who makes wine further inland as well. "But there is so much great soil on the Eastside." To prove his point, he drives me out to two extreme vineyard sites on the southern and eastern ends of Paso Robles.

Our first stop is Margarita Vineyard. Twenty miles southeast of Luna Matta and well south of just about any other vineyard in the AVA, the location alone makes it an





Margarita Vineyard

inhabitants used to grind acorns. We head inside to taste three vintages of Ancient Peaks Cabernet Sauvignon. Especially in cool years like 2006 and 2008, Snyder has managed to produce cabernet with a lean structure and tense acidity, which is unusual in Paso Robles. Meanwhile, Brian Terrizzi pours the Broadside 2008 Cabernet from Margarita Vineyard fruit (a wine he makes with Chris Brockway of Broc Cellars). It, too, is driven by substantial acidity, its cranberry fruit redolent of herbs. No brawny steak wines, these are reds with enough zip to pair with Thanksgiving turkey.

**After we leave** Margarita Vineyard, Brian and I meet up with Anthony Bozzano, who manages grape sales for the French Camp Vineyards, and we strike out for eastern Paso. Digger pines start to replace the western dis-

trict's oaks, then give way to arid chaparral. As we near French Camp after a 40-minute drive, an evanescent stream that's been running parallel to the road, evidence of a recent storm, disappears beneath the creek bed's bleached gravel.

This far corner of Paso Robles is virtually unpopulated, the vineyard surrounded by treeless grazing land. It's a landscape suggestive of the Midwestern plains, complete with bison. "One escaped from a ranch around here," Bozzano says. "We found him munching on the sauvignon blanc."

When the Miller family, owners of the Bien Nacido Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley, bought the French Camp property in 1968, they didn't plan on planting vines. But the spring weather turned out to be too cold for a profitable grain operation, and other



Doug Filippini, Margarita Vyd. co-owner, with a fossilized shell from Oyster Ridge

crops were destroyed by the severe windstorms that plague the area. The vineyard's first vines took root in 1973.

The soils out here are primarily alluvial gravel and clay, with calcareous ancient seabed peaking out at the highest elevation. An extreme site far from the ocean's moderating influence, the high temperatures are higher than just about anywhere else in the region, and the lows are lower. Precipitation is around 11 inches a year—an aquifer running under eastern Paso provides for irrigation to keep the vines alive.

In sync with Paso's penchant for experimentation, the vineyard is currently farming 28 varieties. Terrizzi started buying aglianico here in 2009, from vines originally planted for Randall Graham at Bonny Doon. Inside the French Camp office—a boxy prefab perched on top of a rather desolate hill—Brian opens his two current release aglianicos, the 2009 French Camp and the 2008 Luna Matta. The two properties, about 30 miles from each other as the crow flies, were planted only a few years apart to the same clonal selections; the two wines are markedly different. The 2008 Luna Matta packs bright cherry and cranberry fruit with forceful, mouthwatering acidity. The 2009 French Camp is decidedly earthier, its peppery fruit tightly coiled in dry, dusty tannins.

**Between the wild** eastern steppes and the bucolic slopes of the west lies a series of gently undulating hills that surround the town of Paso Robles. J. Lohr began acquiring property here in the late 1980s. On a sunny Friday morning, winemakers Jeff Meier and Steve

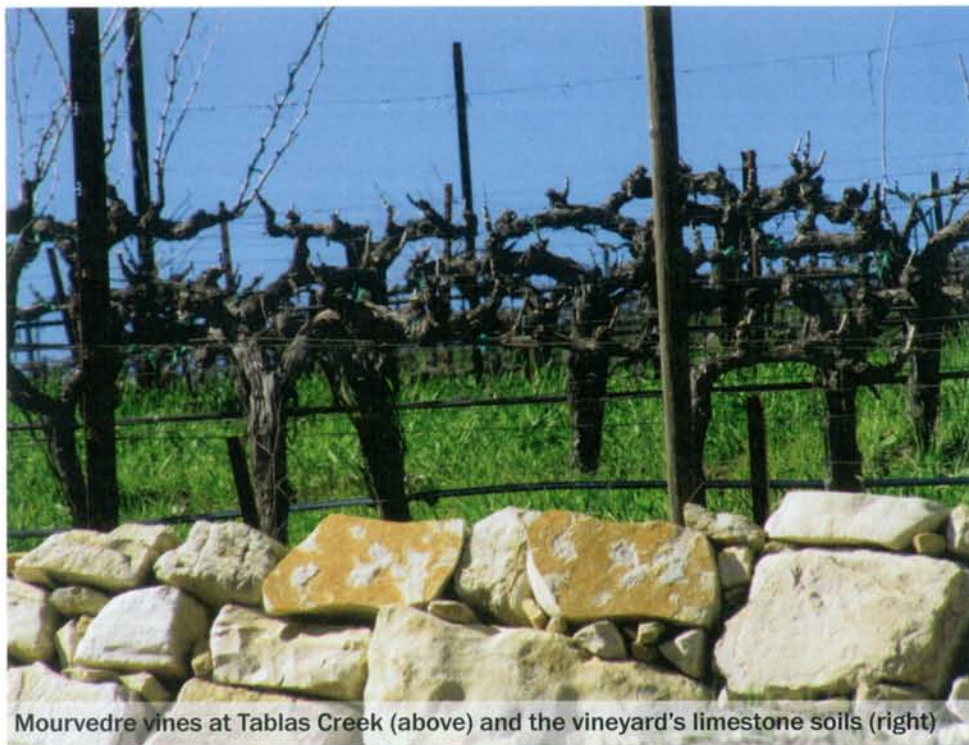


Peck show me those original vineyards, where cabernet and merlot vines are trellised along benches of alluvial gravel and clay.

Peck explains that when J. Lohr first explored Paso Robles, they were looking for a place that could reliably ripen Bordeaux varieties. Their original sites in Monterey, touted at the time as having a Region III climate, proved less than ideal, and Paso's warmth promised an end to the green, pyrazine-derived flavors they were fighting up north.

J. Lohr's investment in the region was the beginning of a massive influx of winemaking capital. When the appellation was first created in 1983, the AVA was home to a mere 17 wineries. Now Paso Robles has 26,000 acres of vines and 200 wineries—but on the whole it's a young region, and even Paso Robles veterans like J. Lohr are still actively exploring new ground.

J. Lohr now farms 2,300 acres across Paso Robles. As their understanding of the region's diversity has grown, the Lohr family has helped lead an effort to better define the AVA's makeup. On the heels of a contentious plan to simply bisect Paso Robles into an eastern and western section by creating a Paso Robles Westside AVA, J. Lohr and others joined together to come up with a more nuanced approach to Paso Robles' distinct terroirs.



Mourvedre vines at Tablas Creek (above) and the vineyard's limestone soils (right)

of these new fruit sources started out almost as an academic exercise," says Peck. "We wanted to see what was unique about all these different potential sub-AVAs." While the cool-climate cabernet from Margarita Vineyard, for example, is different from what they normally aim for, Steve Peck says they've found it useful for building the midpalate of their blends, and that it adds a cassis note brightening their 2007 Cuveé Pau, a wine modeled after Pauillac.

by Robert Haas and the Perrin family of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Jason Haas, Tablas Creek's energetic, red-headed GM, says they picked this site believing it would fully ripen heat-loving southern Rhône grapes like mourvedre and roussanne, but also be temperate enough to produce high-quality Northern Rhône varieties like syrah and viognier. While he points out the miner's lettuce, an edible plant that's sprung up between the vines after this year's heavy winter rains, his two dogs chase jackrabbits down the hill. The varied expositions make all the difference, he explains. Heat-loving roussanne, for example, gets the warmer south-facing slopes, while viognier grows in cooler, shaded north-facing blocks.

Perched at an elevation of 1,500 feet, Tablas Creek is well positioned to catch the storms rolling in from the ocean. Rain that falls here often doesn't make it much farther inland. Tablas Creek gets around 28 inches of rain per year, whereas J. Lohr's Hilltop Vineyard, a short drive to the east, gets less than half that much. In fact, Tablas Creek is able to dry farm in most vintages. Haas explains that the vineyard's concentration of limestone is especially important on this front. Porous and absorbent, the calcareous rock is able to soak up the early season rains and hold moisture well into Paso's long, dry summer.

On our way back to the winery, we walk through the vineyard's nursery, the first building constructed on the property. Jason's father, Robert, and the Perrins populated the nursery with a range of clonal selections im-

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*“We didn’t want to see Paso split into a simple West-East dynamic. We said, let’s go ahead and put really serious science behind this.”—Steve Lohr*

The group organized a team of soil scientists, climatologists and growers and developed a plan calling for 11 individual AVAs within the larger Paso Robles AVA. (The AVA plan is currently under consideration by the TTB.) “We looked at climate and soils,” says COO Steve Lohr. “But we also considered the history of place names in the area, as well as observations from producers about the actual characteristics of grapes grown in different areas.”

J. Lohr now makes use of fruit from ten of Paso's potential sub-AVAs. “Bringing in some

Peck is also curious about the character of another recent planting, a 30-minute drive toward the coast from their winery. Planted in 2009, it's now the westernmost vineyard in Paso Robles, focused on Rhône varieties. Still, J. Lohr couldn't help planting a bit of cabernet and merlot, just to see what it would do in the coastal hills.

**That western territory** is the same neighborhood staked out by Tablas Creek in 1989—the 120-acre Rhône powerhouse established





poised, balanced wine built for seafood, a fleshy white with notes of spiced lemon, green tea and kaffir lime leaf.

Vermentino and other grapes that Tablas Creek pioneered—picpoul and counoise, in particular—are starting to gain a foothold in Paso Robles, as the enthusiasm for these varieties spreads to other growers. Jason Haas

larger holdings, and cattle became Paso Robles' main business.

"I've struggled to make money out here for 40-something years," says Osgood. In a nearby barn, the casualties of those years line up in a neat row of rusted engine blocks. He drives a pickup from 1965, and his tractor is older than that. "I like World War II technol-

*"An old miocene seabed crescent just happened to knuckle up here in the Central Coast." —Jason Haas*

ported from the Rhône, and began selling the cuttings to other producers. If you taste a grenache or a roussanne from California today, there's a good chance that the vines originated with Tablas Creek.

Beyond contributing to a growing library of vines available to domestic producers of Rhône varieties, the nursery project also drives Tablas Creek's own evolution. They're already growing nine Rhône varieties. When their most recent French cuttings clear quarantine, they'll have a full set of the 13 varieties approved for Châteauneuf-du-Pape. At this point, they have no idea how a rarity like terret noir will perform on their property, but they're curious to find out. Haas points out that counoise and grenache blanc ended up doing unexpectedly well at Tablas Creek and have taken on a larger role in the winery's production.

As has vermentino: When one of their vine shipments came out of quarantine, it included six vines of vermentino (known as rolle in the Rhône). Tablas Creek hadn't ordered it. "At first, we thought our order might have gotten mixed up with someone else's," says Haas. It turned out that Didier Gillibert, who manages the Perrins' nursery in the south of France, included them on a hunch. "He said, 'I know these grapes, and from what I've heard about Paso Robles, I thought they'd do well there.'" The vermentino has indeed flourished: The 2010 Vermentino is a

points out one major factor that allows small growers and newer producers in the area to take risks with these new varieties: "The land prices here are ten percent of what you'd pay in Napa, so people can afford to experiment."

**At the end of the day**, Neil Collins, Tablas Creek's winemaker, suggests we visit David Osgood, a grower he works with for his Lone Madrone label. As we near Osgood's farm, a gravel road leads past moss-draped walnut and fruit trees into a secluded valley that seems almost Appalachian. Collins makes an Osgood Vineyard wine called Old Hat—a reference to the big tan cowboy hat that Osgood, as promised, is wearing when we pull into his driveway. He trudges up from his newest block of zinfandel, where a flock of chickens is pecking through the cover crop. When he shakes our hands, they're still caked with dirt.

Osgood opens a cooler, and while we each nurse a cold beer, he gives me a primer on the history of this side of Paso Robles, centered around the township of Adelaida. In the first half of the century, Adelaida was California's breadbasket, producing peaches, apples and most of the nation's walnuts, pistachios and almonds. But with the development of irrigation in the Central Valley, farming out here became an increasingly difficult proposition. In between the two World Wars, a lot of people left. Ranchers consolidated farms into

ogy," he comments—technology that he can fix on his own.

In addition to growing zinfandel and petite sirah, he now takes care of most of the region's remaining walnut orchards. "I'm the biggest walnut guy in Adelaida!" he jokes. Osgood and Collins kick around the idea of starting a Deep Earth Coalition—a group of Paso Robles grape growers committed to dry farming. Then they move on to planning their annual cider party here on the farm, when they'll tap a keg of Neil's hard cider, invite a bunch of friends and roast a pig. And then they're talking about all the acres of unplanted land that could be used for cider orchards. (While Neil's been a winemaker since the early 1990s, he was born and raised in English cider country.) "That's the kind of person I want to buy my grapes from," Collins says as we drive back through the gate and past the old whitewashed one-room Adelaida schoolhouse, closed since 1964.

It's getting dark, and the live oaks and walnut trees start to make Tim Burtonesque silhouettes in the shaded creek valleys. Collins points out an irony: As a winemaker, he needs grapes. And as a farmer, Osgood needs a crop he can sell. But Paso Robles' burgeoning wine industry is inevitably changing the Adelaida farming community. We drive by yet another grove of twisted, lichen-encrusted walnut trees. "Unfortunately," Collins says, "I'd call them nervous walnuts." ■

