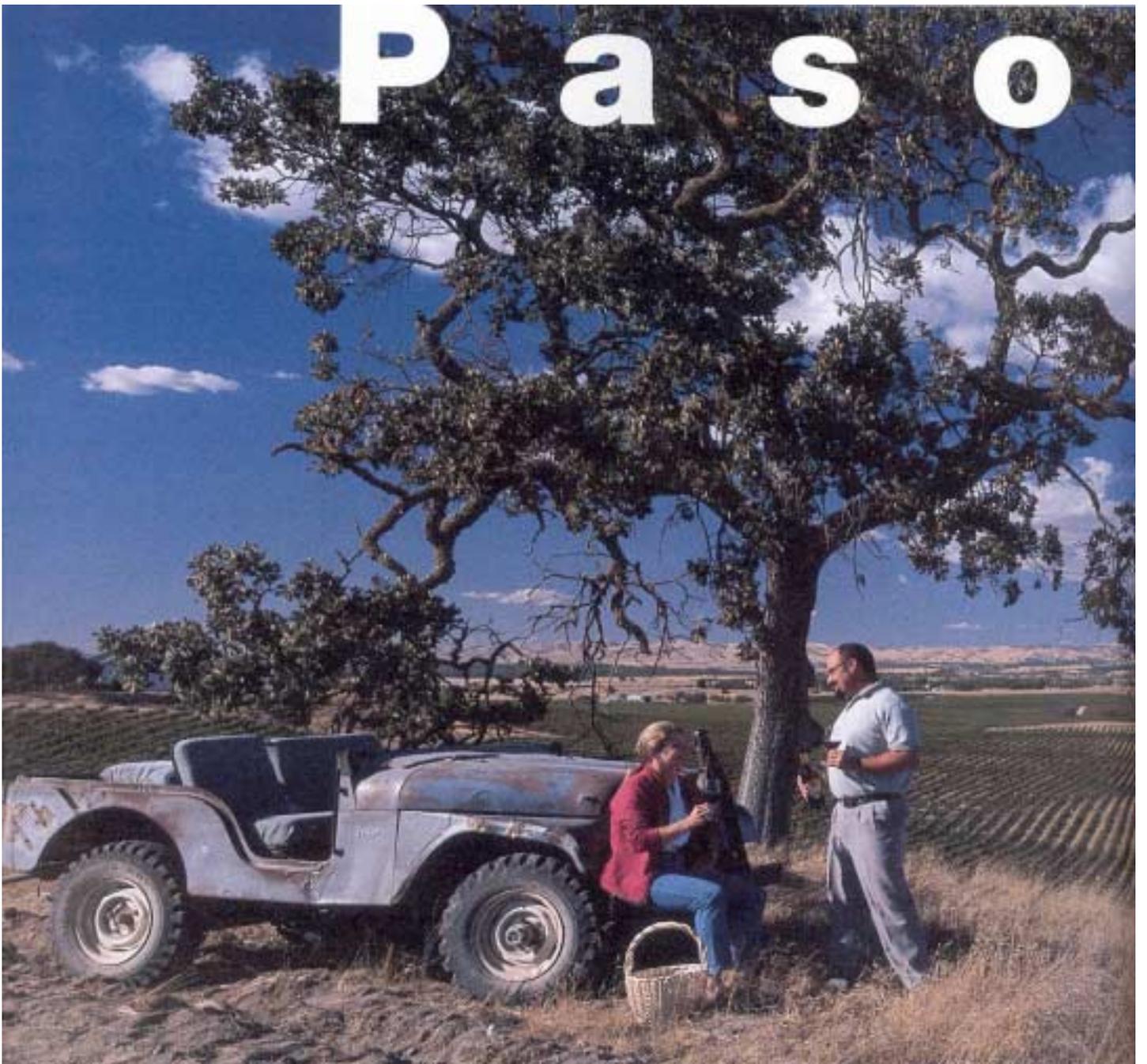


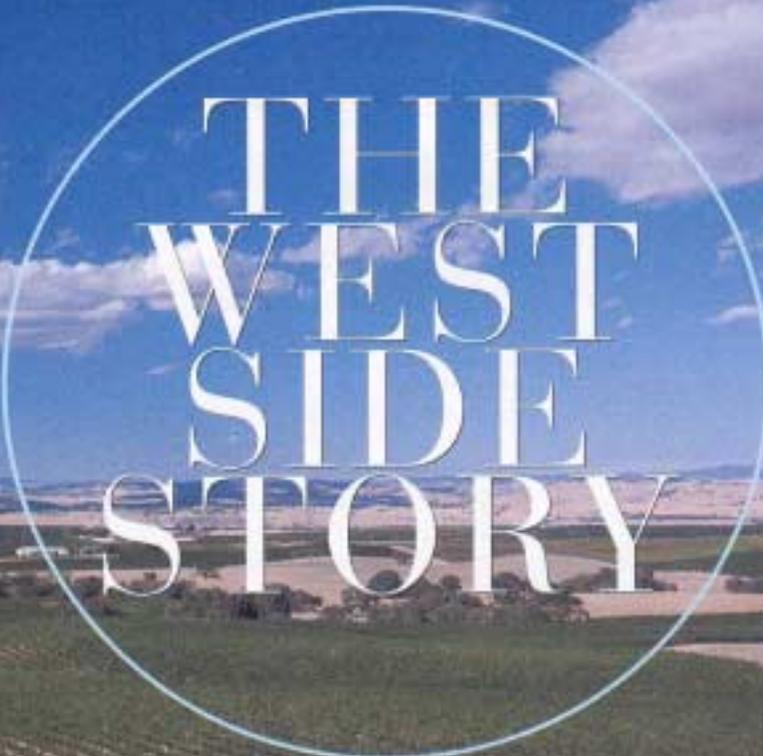
P a s o



Cindy Newkirk, owner of the WineYard at Steinbeck Vineyards, and Chris Taranto, director of tourism for Paso Robles, visit the summit of the property aboard WineYard Willie, the vintage 1958 jeep that is used to take visitors on tours. Right, a quintet of top-quality Paso Robles wines.



R o b l e s



THE WEST SIDE STORY

"A SMALL BAND" OF TALENTED WINEMAKERS IN THIS CENTRAL COAST REGION IS REACHING FOR THE STARS WITH RHÔNE VARIETIES.

Justin Smith is stepping carefully along terraces on the steep upper slope of his vineyard, which he calls "Bone Rock" after the whale fossils that litter the uplifted shale soils. Harvest is coming, and Smith is keeping an eye on sugar levels in the ripening Syrah grapes, which will go into his Saxum wines. In 1987, Edna Valley vintner John Alban persuaded Smith and his father, James Berry Smith, to plant some then-experimental Rhône grape varieties in the family vine-

yard. Before that, the Smiths had been growing Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc.

Smith is part of a group of Rhône fanatics working in Paso Robles, a region of inland San Luis Obispo County that achieved its own AVA status in 1983. "There's a small band of us focusing on Rhône varietals," says another member, Austin Hope, of Austin Hope Wines. "We really believe this is *the place* to grow Syrah in California."

By "*the place*," Hope means the western part of Paso Robles. The AVA is "a huge entity," says Smith, comprising 666,618 acres – that's about three times the size of Napa Valley. "We've got areas that are only nine miles off the [Pacific] coast, and some that are closer to the Central Valley," Smith explains. Paso Robles is located midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, about 200 miles from each. It's about 30 miles north of San Luis Obispo.

BY STEVE HEIMOFF

PHOTOS BY GERALD L. FRENCH

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The dividing line between cool and warm Paso is, roughly, Highway 101. On an August day, it can be 110 degrees in the east, 105 degrees in downtown Paso and 95 in the western hills. Westsiders like Smith, Hope and other members of the “band” are talking about applying for a separate AVA, but the process is only in its early stages.

Paso Robles built its early reputation on the strength of visionaries who developed wineries in the east. Gary Eberle founded Estrella River Winery in 1977, and, a couple of years later, Eberle Winery. In 1984, Chuck Ortman started his nearby Meridian brand, which Beringer purchased in 1988.

In 1981, Ken Volk chose an area just a few miles south of the city of Paso Robles, in the cattle town of Templeton, for his Wild Horse Winery (sold in 2003 to Peak Wines International). Together, Eberle, Meridian and Wild Horse established Paso Robles’ reputation as the source of good, soft, affordable red and white wines. Eberle and Volk were early Rhône enthusiasts; the former has also made important contributions in Cabernet Sauvignon.

These three set a pattern of the east side being dominated by relatively large wineries; their ranks have since been joined by the likes of EOS, Martin & Weyrich, J. Lohr and others. Wineries from outside the area, including Gallo, Robert Mondavi, Estancia, Fetzer and Kendall-Jackson, also own or control east side vineyards.

Western Paso Robles, though, is another ballgame. Where the east is as flat as a billiard table, making it convenient for large, contiguous vineyards, in the west the hills rise abruptly. Referred to locally as the Adelaida Hills (not to be confused with Australia’s Adelaide Hills), they’re part of the Santa Lucia Mountains, which span 140 miles from Carmel Bay through San Luis Obispo County. It’s in these remote hills, valleys and benchlands, as well as in a more southerly and even cooler area, called the Templeton Gap, that the Westside Rhôneistes work.

“You couldn’t have big wineries out here,” explains Neil Collins, the winemaker and vineyard manager at Tablas Creek Winery. The topography

is too rugged, the soils too meager, to support high-volume winegrowing. Smith’s yields at Saxum, about two tons per acre, are typical.

Although grapegrowing on the west side began in the 1960s – Hoffman Mountain Ranch was among the first — Rhône varieties weren’t established until the 1980s. Smith, at Saxum, and Tablas Creek both started around 1989. Today, what Tablas’s general manager, Jason Haas, calls, “the Rhône community” has expanded to include Shadow Canyon, Summerwood, Linne Calodo, L’Aventure, Garretson, Villa Creek and Justin (whose initial success was based on their Bordeaux varieties). New wineries or brands pop up all the time, making census-taking difficult.

Haas says the decision by his father, Robert, and the Perrin family of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, to co-establish a Rhône-oriented winery in western Paso Robles was driven by the limestone substrate – so similar to Châteauneuf’s – and by the climate (see sidebar “Fifty Years in Wine”). Daytime temperatures are warm, but cool off at night by as much as 50 degrees, resulting in average temperatures that are about the same as they are in Châteauneuf. The presence of the Perrins has been vital in providing local winemakers with French viticultural and winemaking know-how, not to mention Rhône clones.

What the west side Rhône wines all have in common is that they are “very powerful, fruit-filled, ripe wines with great tannins,” in the words of Tablas Creek’s Collins. Alcohol tends to be high, especially for the hot vintages of the last three years, but the wines rarely taste hot or unbalanced.

The small band of Adelaida-Templeton Gap vintners meet regularly and seem to enjoy competing among themselves for quality. Just as Napa Valley winemakers have made a specialty of high-end Cabernet Sauvignon, these winemakers of west Paso (by whatever name it’s eventually known) may make this the first region in the state to specialize in high-end Syrahs. As such, they are helping to chart the future of Rhône wines, especially reds, in California.

Nine Westerners to Watch



AUSTIN HOPE

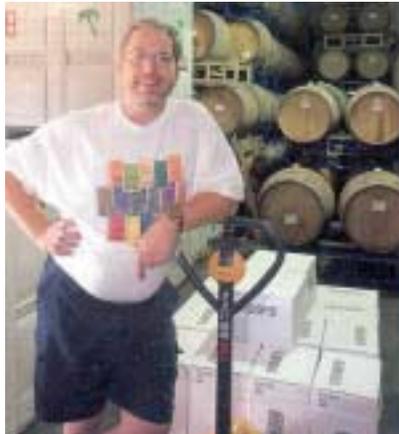
Chuck Hope planted east Paso Robles vineyards in 1978, sold grapes, then established the Treana brand in the '90s. Son Austin put in the first westside plantings in 1987, with Cabernet. After tasting a 1995 Guigal Syrah, he tore out the Cab and converted the vineyards to Rhône varieties. Now he has his own label and produces 100 percent Syrah. With vine maturity he plans to do block/clonal bottlings. Top-rated wine: Austin Hope 2002 Hope Family Vineyard Syrah (89 points).

GARRETSON

Former Eberle and Wild Horse executive Mat Garretson started The Viognier Guild, the forerunner of the colorful Hospice du Rhône event, which he still directs. Garretson launched his own brand in 2001, specializing in Rhône varieties. He owns no vineyards, but has long-term contracts exclusively with west-side growers. Top-rated wines: Garretson 2001 "The Aisling" Syrah (91 points), Garretson 2002 "The Lusacain" Rozet Vineyard Syrah (90 points).

JUSTIN

This pioneering Adelaida Hills winery originally specialized in Bordeaux grapes, and still makes one of the Cabernet Sauvignons south of the Bay Area. The winery is located in the warmest part of western Adelaida, at an elevation of 1,600 feet. Justin hopped on the Rhône bandwagon a few years ago, using purchased grapes from Templeton Gap planted to a Tablas Creek clone. Some Syrah grows on the estate. Top rated wines: Justin 2002 Justification (92 points), Justin 2001 Isosceles (92 points), Justin 1001 Syrah (90 points).



L'AVENTURE

This Templeton Gap vineyard and winery achieved cult status with its vision of "a Paso blend, not a Bordeaux blend, not a Rhône blend," in the words of owner Stephan Asseo, a transplanted Entre-Deux-Mers chateau owner. Asseo briefly considered Napa, Monterey and Santa Barbara before deciding on his west Paso location in 1998. Top rated wines: L'Aventure 2002 Optimus (94 points), L'Aventure 2002 Estate Cuvée (93 points).

LINNE CALODO

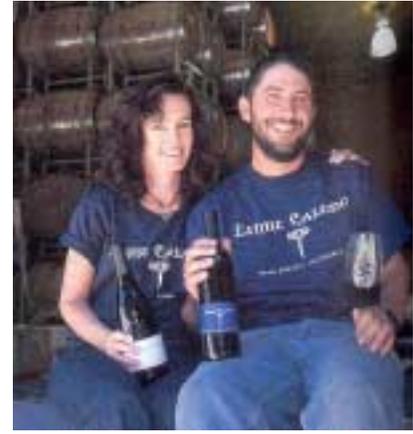
Matt Trevisan took over after Justin Smith left, in 2002. Trevisan buys grapes from local Templeton Gap vineyards such as Cherry, Leona's, Lock, Denner, Kruse. "I am not looking to make varietal wines," Trevisan says, Linne Calodo's wines are Southern Rhône blends with fanciful names (The Contrarian is a white, the Nemesis and Rising Tides are reds). Top rated wines: Linne Calodo 2003 Nemesis (94 points), Linne Calodo 2003 Rising Tides (93 points).

SAXUM

The James Berry Vineyard was planted by James Smith in 1980 to Burgundian varieties, which were sold to others. A switchover to Rhône grapes was initiated in 1987, at the urging of John Alban. James's son, Justin Smith, started the Linne Calodo brand, with buddy Matt Trevisan, in 1998, then left to start his own brand, Saxum, in 2002. Top-rated wines: Saxum 2002 James Berry Vineyard Bone Rock Syrah (95 points), Saxum 2002 Broken Stones Syrah (91 points).

SHADOW CANYON

Owner/vintner Gary Gibson bought his



undeveloped York Mountain AVA property in 1996, and spent years establishing the vineyard, 1,600 feet up in Santa Lucia, in the windy part of Templeton Gap. The vineyard in 100 percent Syrah, to 5 different clones; yields are low, only 1-2 tons per acre. Gibson makes his Syrah from the best barrels and sells off the rest. Top-rated wines: Shadow Canyon 2003 Shadow Canyon Vineyard Syrah (90 points), Shadow Canyon 2003 Larner Vineyard Grenache (89 points).

SUMMERWOOD

This is a new brand, its first vintage in 2002, with a winery and upscale inn on Highway 46 West, in the warmer areas of Templeton Gap. The winery buys most of its fruit from westside vineyards like James Berry, Denner and Jensen. It owns some Syrah and Cabernet (originally planted by Austin Hope), but sells the Cab. Plans are to release the Syrah in two tiers, Cream Label and Black Label. Top-rated wines: Summerwood 2003 Diosa Rhône Red Wine (91 points), Summerwood 2003 Diosa Blanc Rhône White Wine (90 points).

TABLAS CREEK

The Perrin family (of Chateau de Beaucastel) and American wine importer Robert Haas co-founded the brand in 1989. They chose the Adelaida Hills area over Santa Ynez Valley's Purisima Mountain property (now Stolpman) mainly due to its ability to heat-ripen Mourvèdre. The winery specializes in red and white Châteauneuf-style blends. "With a blend of 3 or 4 varieties, the flavors play better off food," says Jason Haas. Top-rated wines: Tablas Creek 2003 Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc (95 points) and Tablas Creek 2002 Esprit de Beaucastel Red Blend (89 points).