

Paso Robles

An established region seeks a new identity built on Rhone varieties **By Daniel Sogg**

Frenchmen do strange things in Paso Robles. François Perrin, co-owner of Tablas Creek Winery in the hills west of town and of Château Beaucastel in France's Rhône Valley, just licked a chunk of limestone. He nods to himself, savoring the flavor, then sets it on the tasting room counter, politely indicating the unlicked side for others to try.

No one does, but the suggestion seems reasonable to Perrin, 53. The limestone, plucked from the Tablas Creek vineyard, is a spot-on match with the chalkiness expressed in some Tablas Creek wines, in this case the Esprit Blanc de Beaucastel 2002, a blend of Roussanne, Grenache Blanc and Viognier.

The chalk is the reason Perrin, his brother Jean-Pierre, 61, and their partner, Robert Haas, founder of importer/distributor Vineyard Brands, chose Paso Robles as the location for the estate, which they started in 1990. Calcareous (limestone-rich) soils are common in some of the great vineyards of France, including sites in Champagne, Chablis and the Rhône Valley. But they are relatively rare in California.

"We wanted to mimic the soil equations we have [in the Rhône] because we wanted to plant the same varieties," explains Haas, still spry at 79. Their property now comprises 97 acres, divided fairly evenly between red Rhône varieties (predominantly Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah and Counoise) and white Rhône varieties (mostly Roussanne, Grenache Blanc and Viognier).

Paso Robles is undergoing a dramatic makeover, and Rhône grapes are the most intriguing face of that makeover. Once known as a second-tier producer of bulk grapes, the region now has a small but solid coterie of growers and vintners aiming for the high end. Some, like Saxum and Tablas Creek, focus exclusively on Rhône grapes, while others, such as Justin and Stephan Vineyards, produce both Rhône and Bordeaux varieties.

These properties reflect a sort of tectonic shift westward. Most of the older estates, such as Eberle and Meridian, sit on the rolling benchlands east of Highway 101, which bisects the appellation. But practically all of the top wines are coming from west of the highway, on rocky hillside sites with a cooling proximity to the Pacific Ocean.

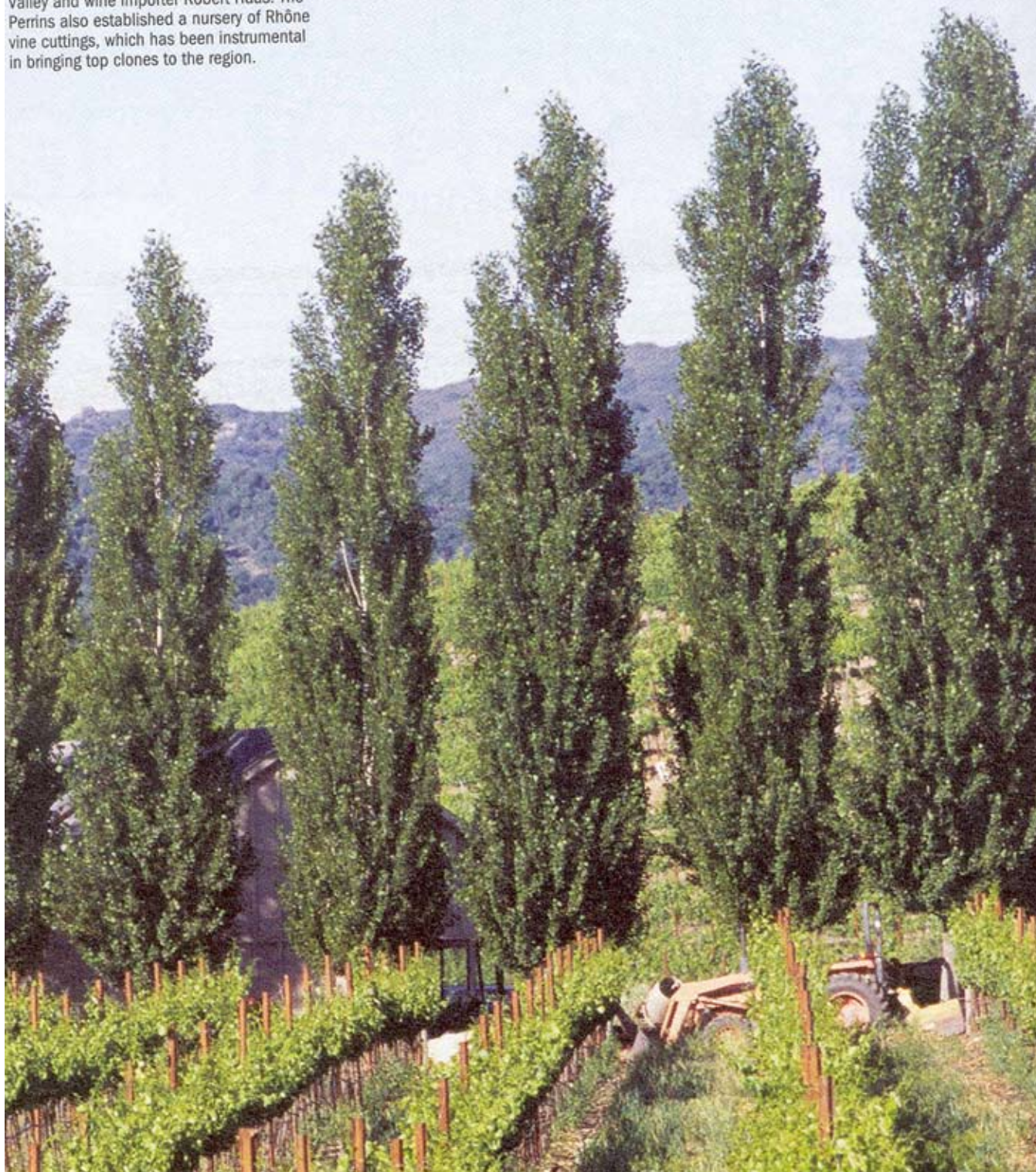
But it's not as simple as east versus west, nor can it be in an AVA whose boundaries embrace 666,618 acres, an area nearly three times the size of Napa Valley. About 27,000 acres are planted (only 2,200 of them west of the highway), with 40 varieties on sites ranging from 7 to 35 miles from the ocean. Area vintners have just begun the process of dividing the region into 10 (or so) subappellations. For now, Paso Robles' finest producers are still getting their bearings—and defining the character of their wines.

The Perrins brought unimpeachable Rhône credentials to Paso Robles. And just as important for the region, they brought Rhône vine cuttings. Tablas Creek started a nursery in 1997 that has sold an estimated 1.5 million vines to U.S. estates. That demand led competing California nurseries to ob-



Bordeaux expatriate Stephan Asseo came to Paso Robles for the chalky limestone soils, which are common in his homeland but rare in California.

Tablas Creek Winery was cofounded in 1990 by the Perrin brothers of the Rhône Valley and wine importer Robert Haas. The Perrins also established a nursery of Rhône vine cuttings, which has been instrumental in bringing top clones to the region.



tain and offer other French Rhône clones.

Tablas Creek makes nine Rhône-variety bottlings—four whites, four reds and a rosé—with prices ranging from \$20 to \$40. The whites, which feature racy acidity and distinctive minerality, have been more consistent. The Esprit Blanc de

Beaucastel 2002 (\$40) scored 92 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale. But the reds, such as Tablas' top-of-the-line Esprit de Beaucastel, a blend of Mourvèdre, Syrah, Grenache and Counoise, are improving, largely because they are picking riper grapes with softer tannins.

Nearby, Bordeaux expatriate Stephan Asseo, 46, has settled on a combination of Rhône and Bordeaux grapes for his Stephan Vineyards. The winemaker arrived in 1998, lured, like the Perrin brothers, by the limestone-riddled soils and relatively modest land prices. He also welcomed freedom from French appellation rules that dictate grape varieties and production methods. Asseo planned to plant half Cabernet Sauvignon and most of the balance to Rhône varieties. Subsequent experience tweaked the percentages—Syrah is the primary grape, followed by Cabernet, Petit Verdot, Grenache and Mourvèdre. There are 56 acres total, divided into 25 blocks.

Asseo has nine bottlings, of which eight are red, with prices ranging from \$20 to \$75. His best wines, the L'Aventure Estate Syrah and L'Aventure Estate Cuvée, a blend of Cabernet, Syrah and Petit Verdot, are unusually bold and concentrated, and consistently rank among the best in Paso Robles. The 2001 L'Aventure Estate Cuvée scored 93 points. But success here doesn't come easily. To achieve the desired concentration, Asseo says it's necessary to limit yields to no more than 2 tons per acre.

Asseo, unshaven and wind-burned, negotiates the steep slopes in a mud-splattered four-wheel drive vehicle he calls "the mule"—more or less a stripped-down golf cart without the stability. He frowns at the number of pink ribbons (marking dead vines) scattered throughout a block of year-old Syrah. "F-ing gophers," he says, with a strong French accent that makes it come out "go-fare." The rodents gnawed through the vines, killing nearly 40 percent of them, so Asseo now pays a bounty on them. But today he feels lucky; storms pummeled much of the Central Coast the night before, downing trees and power lines, but missing his property.

After eight years, Asseo takes it in stride. He practically qualifies as part of the Paso Robles old guard. In 2002, the appellation was home to 64 wineries. Now there are 110, with many of the newcomers focused on Rhône grapes. Part of the burgeoning interest is due to the Hospices du Rhône, a gathering of producers and consumers held annually in the area since 1994. The three-day event, equal parts seminar and party, celebrates all grapes Rhône.

But the region is too diverse to fit neatly in a single slot. The first local wine to garner acclaim was the Ridge Zinfandel Dusi Ranch 1967. A recent standout is the Rosenblum Cellars Zinfandel Richard Sauret Vineyards 2003 (92 points, \$19). Adelaida Cellars makes an intriguing Pinot Noir from vines planted in 1963 at an elevation of 1,700 feet. For all the Syrah excitement, it accounts for only about 10 percent of the appellation acreage. There's three times as much Cabernet and almost twice as much Merlot. Even Chardonnay, a grape with a thin local résumé, covers a comparable number of acres.

"I think there will be critical mass in four or five years—there's a new wave [of vineyards and wineries] coming up," says Justin Smith, 35, who owns Saxum with his wife, Heather.

They started the label in 2002, but the Smith family has been growing grapes at the James Berry Vineyard in western Paso Robles since 1980. Encouraged by Edna Valley vintner John Alban, they planted Rhône varieties in 1988, and the property now ranks as one of the region's most esteemed grape sources. Part of that reputation stems from Saxum's Bone Rock Syrah, a wine that features unusual intensity and vibrant minerality. The 2000 and 2001 bottlings each scored 93 points. The 50-acre site also contains Grenache, Mourvèdre and 26-year-old Chardonnay vines.

Smith divides his time among the family vineyard, Saxum and consulting. He has overseen the planting of 260 acres in western Paso Robles, but still sees the region as a work in progress. "Every time we replant we do something a little different. We're learning, still figuring it out," he says.

Many of the region's ambitious properties, planted with better clones and more viticultural savvy, are just starting to produce fruit. One Smith client, Denner Vineyard, completed a \$5 million production facility last fall. Denner has 110 acres, split evenly between Bordeaux and Rhône red varieties. Ninety percent of the grapes are sold to other Paso Robles wineries. (According to the local vintners association, more than 70 percent of the grapes grown in the region still go into wines bearing non-Paso Robles appellations.)

One Denner customer is Justin Vineyards, launched in 1981 by former banker Justin Baldwin and his wife, Deborah. Justin, with 80 acres of vines, is a Paso Robles estate that would look at home in upscale Napa Valley. Their Syrah shows notable improvement (the Paso Robles Reserve earned 93 and 92 points for the 2002 and 2001 vintages, respectively), but Bordeaux reds remain the focus. The 1997 Justin Isosceles (95 points), a blend of primarily Cabernet Sauvignon with the balance Cabernet Franc and Merlot, remains the highest-scoring Paso Robles wine to date.

But even Justin, arguably the gray eminence winery of Paso Robles, remains in transition. This year it replaced 35 acres of Chardonnay with Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon. Chardonnay made sense, says Baldwin, in the market realities of the early '80s, but those have changed. Now he wants to plant those varieties thought best suited to the site.

Like many area properties, Justin has very rocky soil. And while Baldwin doesn't seem the sort to taste-test chalk, he—like the other top producers in Paso Robles—is learning to quarry maximum quality from these vineyards.