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# FALLING IN LOVE WITH PASO

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*This fast-growing coastal California appellation can be almost anything its winemakers want it to be*

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**A**S A WINE consultant and château owner in Entre-Deux-Mers, in Bordeaux, Stephan Asseo found himself “living a crazy life, spending more time driving from winery to winery than making wine”. He wanted to try someplace new, he says, and to make a different kind of wine. He looked at other growing regions, first in Eu-

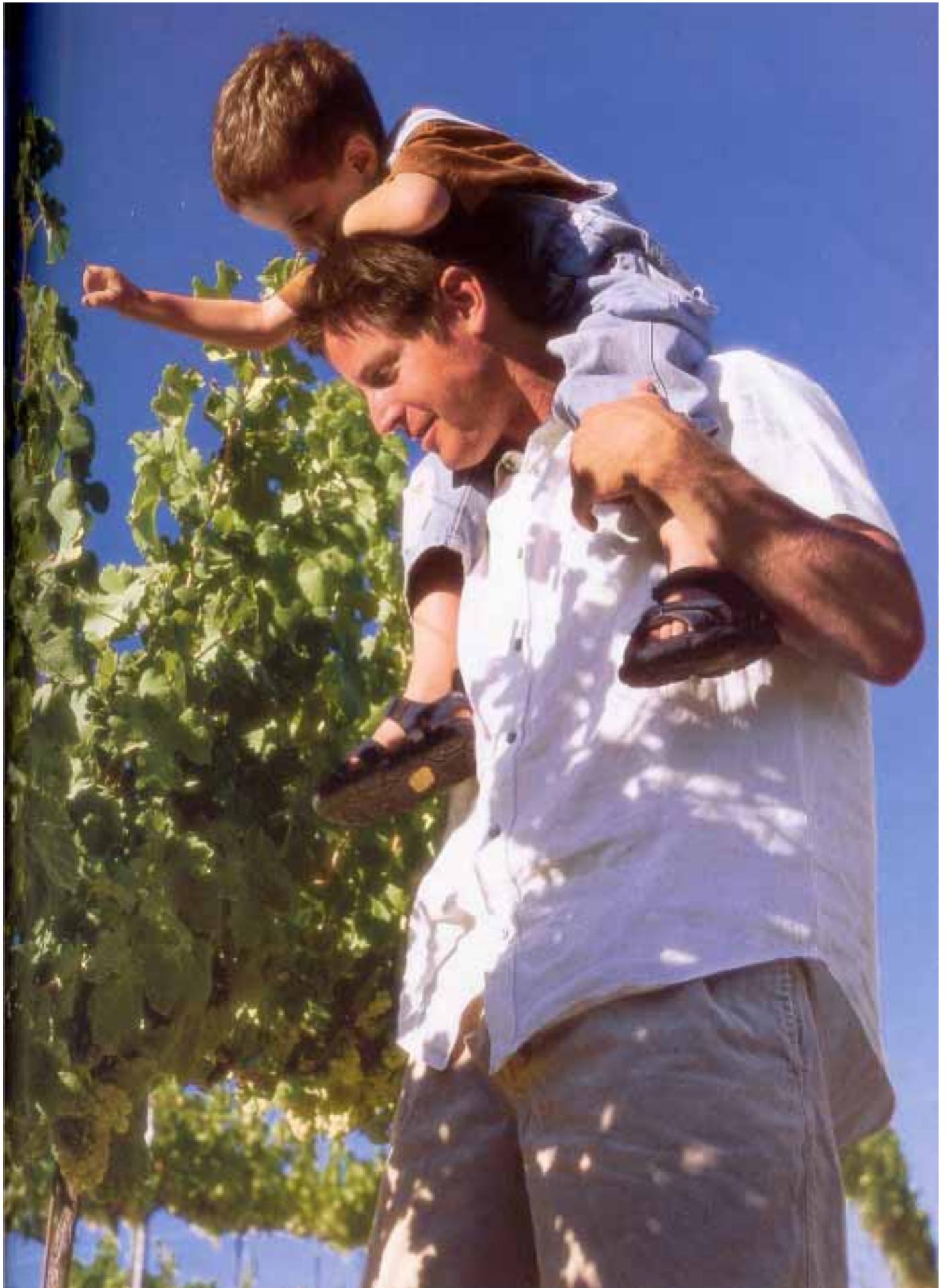
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An array of Paso Robles wines, left. Facing page, up-and-coming Paso winemaker Justin Smith of Saxum, with his son, Colin.

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BY ROGER MORRIS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MACDUFF EVERTON



## P A S O R O B L E S

rope, then in Australia. Nothing clicked. “I came to the U.S. in 1997, first to Napa,” he says. “I did not fall in love.” Next he looked at Sonoma – “very, very nice terroir”, but the terroir cost too much. Monterey? “Didn’t fall in love.” Santa Barbara County? “Not my kind of soil.” Then he visited Paso Robles. “This time,” he says, “I fell in love.” He opened his L’Aventure winery there in 1998.

It seems that much of the wine world these days is falling in love with Paso Robles. Napa’s premier zinfandel cult winery, Turley, has bought property in the area, as have such other North Coast luminaries as Rabbit Ridge and Château Potelle. Larger producers, like Gallo, Mondavi, and J. Lohr, have been in Paso for several years, using local grapes to upgrade their midlevel “coastal” wines.

Land is still plentiful in the Paso Robles appellation – which is located along Highway 101 at the headwaters of the north-flowing Salinas River, midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco – and still relatively cheap. Perhaps the region’s greatest appeal, though, is that it offers something to almost everybody. Several producers of Bordeaux-style blends have been drawn to the sandy loam of the hotter Eastside river plains, which sweep away for miles before they meet the Cholame Hills, which separate the appellation from the San Joaquin Valley. Zinfandel mavens search out small patches of old vines that have been tended here for generations. The growing Rhône brigade often takes to the rippling Westside hills, laced with calcareous soils, which are regularly enveloped by cooling morning fogs from the Pacific. Advocates of pinot noir tend to like York Mountain, the small, independent appellation in the southwestern hills.

As pioneering Paso vintner Gary Eberle – who brought the region to the attention of wine drinkers in the early 1980s with his Estrella River Winery (now Meridian Vineyards) and today runs the premium Eberle Winery there – puts it, “For a long time, so many of our grapes went north in trucks to be made

into wine up there. Now people are coming down here to start their own wineries. It’s part of the maturation of Paso Robles.”

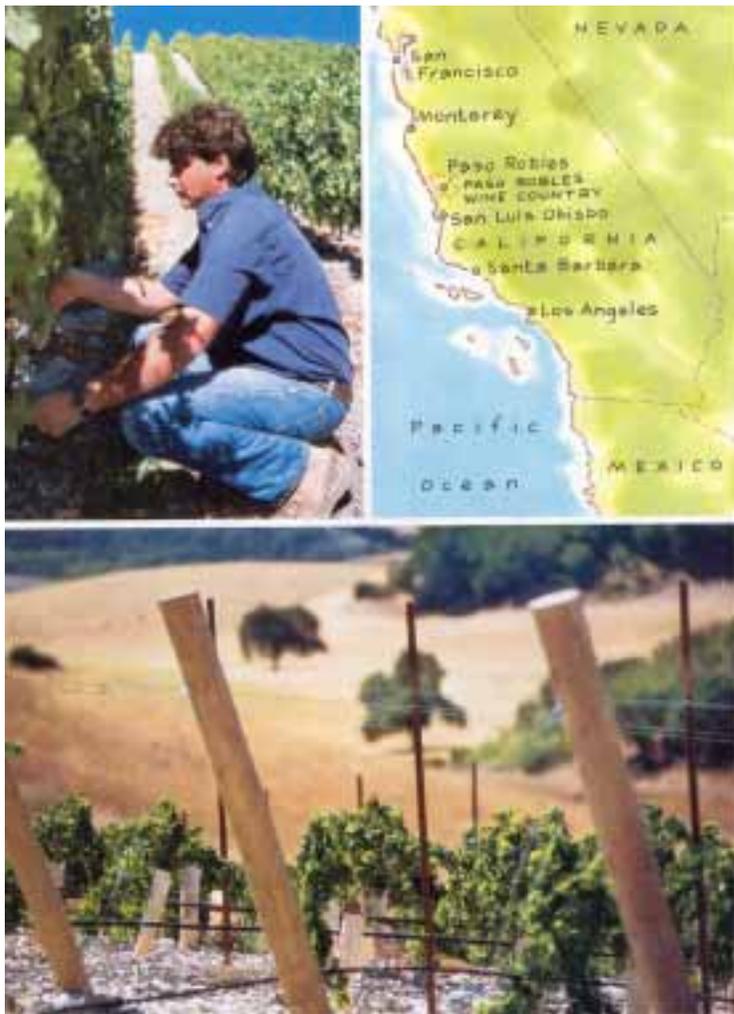
“LESS FERTILE SOILS like ours tend to produce more interesting wines,” says Austin Hope, who is in charge of viticulture and winemaking at his family’s Treana winery. Hope grows cabernet, merlot, grenache, syrah, mourvèdre, and petit verdot on the Westside, experimenting with clones and dense, five-by-five-foot and six-by-four-foot plantings. Hope has roots in the area himself: his family farmed citrus, apples, and grapes here and eventually became the suppliers of fruit for Caymus

Vineyards’s famous Liberty School cabernet. The Hopes now own the label, but their primary wine is a complex red blend of Rhône and Bordeaux varietals called simply Treana.

Although Rhône grapes were first harvested commercially in the area a decade earlier (Gary Eberle was the first to plant them here), interest in these varietals soared following the establishment in 1989 of a joint venture between wine importer Robert Haas and the Perrin family, proprietors of the famous Beaucastel properties in the Rhône Valley itself. They named their enterprise, based on a 114-acre parcel in the Santa Lucia foothills, just west of the Paso Robles city limits, Tablas Creek Vineyard. Interestingly, the partnership’s first project was not winemaking but the importation and propagation of Rhône rootstock. “It takes us three years to bring the vines into the country, checking to make sure the indicator plants are virus-free,” says Denise Chouinard, business manager of Tablas Creek, “and another three years to propagate the vines.” Since they began their efforts, Tablas Creek has supplied Rhône-grape rootstock for wineries not just in Paso but all over the West Coast and in Virginia and Texas.

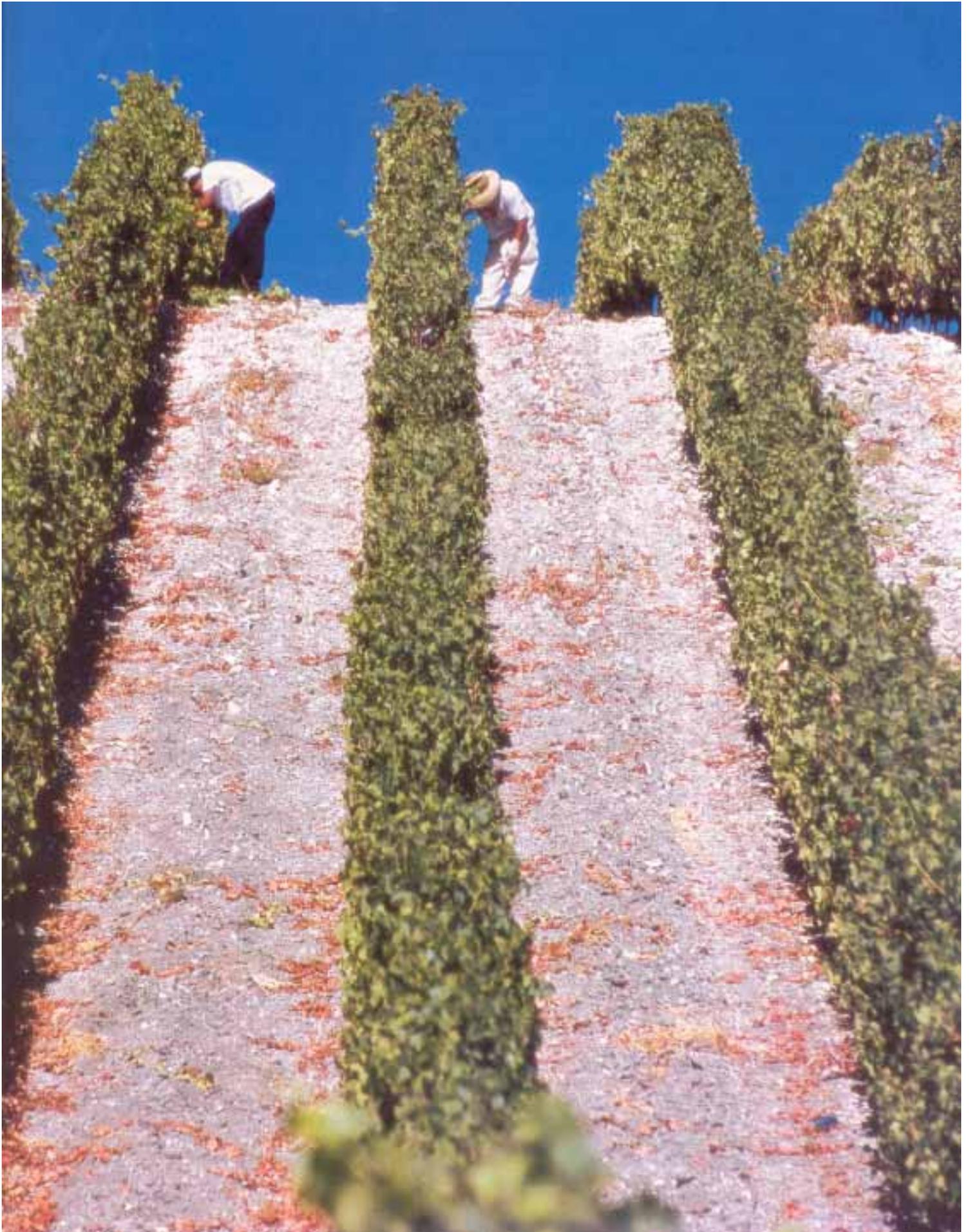
According to Haas, one of the biggest surprises has been the quality of the white grapes in his vineyards. “We knew this was the right soil,” he says, “but we didn’t realize how well the white fruit ripened.” Although Tablas

**Scenes from Stephan Asseo’s L’Aventure vineyard: Asseo tends his vines, below left; bottom, a view of the vineyard; facing page, workers dropping leaves and fruit from syrah vines before harvest.**



**PASO ROBLES VINEYARD LAND**  
*is still plentiful and relatively cheap,  
with terroirs to please almost everybody*

ROGER MORRIS, a Pennsylvania-based marketing and communications consultant and writer, profiled Jamie Davies of Schramsberg Vineyards for our March 2003 issue.



## P A S O R O B L E S

Creek's red and white are both delicious (the winery also produces miniscule quantities of impressive rosé), the white is almost stunning in its complexity.

TIM SPEAR and Justin Smith are two young Paso Robles winemakers in their early 30s, both of whom have produced small lots of relatively expensive Rhône-style wines, in borrowed facilities, that quickly drew critical acclaim. There the similarities end.

Tim Spear lives in Arroyo Grande, about 35 miles south of Paso Robles, with his wife, Mimi, the inspiration for the Clos Mimi label, and their young daughter Maggie, and admits something that most winemakers would never think of disclosing. "I try to befriend winemakers whom Robert Parker writes about," he says. He has talked his way into most peripheral jobs at Château Lynch-Bages in Bordeaux and at such California properties as Meridian, Chalone, Silverado, Justin, Mumm Napa valley, and Tablas Creek.

## Tasting Notes

**W**e recently tasted 17 wines from the Paso Robles appellation -- four whites and 13 reds -- several of them from vintages that will likely not be available by the time these notes appear, but the rest currently on sale (if not always easy to find). These were our favorites:

**L'AVENTURE ESTATE CUVÉE 2001 (\$75).** A very dark, concentrated blend of syrah, cabernet sauvignon, and petit verdot, held in by firm tannin but somehow surprisingly approachable anyway, chocolatey and rich, with a long elegant finish.

**CLOS MIMI, SHELL CREEK VINEYARD, 1997 (\$50).** A big, pure, straightforward syrah, exuberantly oaky, with ample fruit, but already starting to dry out. More a suggestion of future quality than a fine wine in itself.

**EQUUS ROUSSANNE 2001 (\$16).** An oily, floral, pleasant but uncomplicated white from the Templeton-based Wild Horse Winery's Rhône-style label.

**EBERLE ESTATE CABERNET SAUVIGNON 1999 (\$28).** Good, all-purpose cabernet, tannic, minty, slightly chalky, but full of varietal fruit and reasonably complex in aroma and flavor.

**JUSTIN WINERY CHARDONNAY 2001 (\$18.50).** Fresh and fruity, with some new oak but also plenty of chardonnay character. Author Morris found it redolent of white peaches.



**JUSTIN WINERY ISOSCELES 2000 (\$55).** A juicy Bordeaux-inspired blend (the cabernet sauvignon comes through vividly), but surprisingly austere and perhaps ultimately too simplistic.

**PEACHY CANYON EAST-SIDE ZINFANDEL 2000 (\$18).** A very nice bottle for the money, light but clean, well balanced, and showing good varietal character.

**RABBIT RIDGE WESTSIDE PETITE SIRAH, VINEYARD RESERVE, CRISTELLA RANCH 2001 (\$32).** Inky dark, tannic, and mixed-berry fruity, with that dusty herbaceous character wine merchant Kermit Lynch calls *garrigues* (which is Provencal scrub).

**SAXUM JAMES BERRY VINEYARD BONE ROCK SYRAH 2000 (\$48).** An immense, generous syrah nose, leading into a fat, juicy opulent wine, full of varietal character and sass.

**TURLEY PESENTI VINEYARD ZINFANDEL 2001 (\$35).** Unexpectedly perfumey in aroma, with ample fruit spiced with bell peppers and mint.

**TABLAS CREEK ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL BLANC 2001 (\$30).** Rich, complex, lively, and fairly dripping with ripe peach and apricot fruit.

**TABLAS CREEK ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL 2000 (\$30).** Earthy, full, and faintly gassy, with a distinct wild-cherry character in its profusion of fruit. Unequivocally Rhône-like.

**TREANA 2000 (\$32).** An intense, herbaceous blend of syrah, cabernet sauvignon, and merlot, attractive in flavor but a little flat and somewhat hollow in the middle range. -- THE EDITORS

**The James Berry vineyard, source of both of Saxum's syrahs, at sunset, top; above, Benito "Benny" Dusi, on his tractor, as usual, at Dusi Ranch; above right, signs in front of the Justin Winery.**

## P A S O R O B L E S

A pleasant, very serious young man who grew up in Tarzana, in Southern California, Spear – who has been encouraged by the praise and high scores his wines have won from Parker – seems to stand apart from many of his colleagues in this laid-back, California-cool enclave, not least because he prices his syrah at \$50 a bottle, high for the region, especially for a relative beginner.

Justin Smith has been farming grapes in the same place for most of his life. When he was ten, in 1980, he helped his father, James “Pebble” Smith, plant vines on the hillside slopes that stretch from Willow Creek Road up toward the western-facing ridgetop where Justin and his young family now live. He shows a visitor where in 1990 they used jackhammers to carve out a four-acre, stone-step terrace vineyard in the almost solid calcareous soil to plant syrah, unearthing whalebones in the process. Today Smith makes two wines, both syrahs, under the Saxum label. “We use minimal techniques,” he says, “with small-lot fermentation, pumping over and punching down, with four weeks or so for maceration and then directly to the barrel” – no filters, no fining, no adjusting for acidity.

“Our family has been here for more than 20 years,” Smith says, squinting against the setting sun, still sweating from a day in the family vineyards. “It’s good.”

“THEY KEEP asking me, ‘Benny, when are you going to get off the tractor?’” says 70-year-old Benito Dusi. If his name sounds familiar, it’s probably because you’ve seen Dusi Ranch credited on the labels of zinfandels from two top wineries – Ridge Vineyards and Peachy Canyon. “The regional characteristic of Paso Robles zinfandels like Benny’s,” says Paul Draper of Ridge, who has sniffed out great California zinfandel vineyards for more than 20 years, “is that they are approachable, rich, and not as tightly wound as some from the North Coast.”

In spite of its reputation, Dusi’s 40-acre plot is hardly scenic these days, hemmed in as it is by traffic, a cement plant, and convenience stores. Benny Dusi can remember when he used to drive his tractor casually across 101, which is now a four-lane highway. Apart from that, he says, nothing has changed on the ranch. He still dry-farms (without irrigation) whenever pos-

sible and says he has made very few changes in the way he grows grapes, except for occasionally – the last time was seven years ago – updating the machinery. (Dusi keeps the retired pieces and adds them to his collection of vintage tractors.)

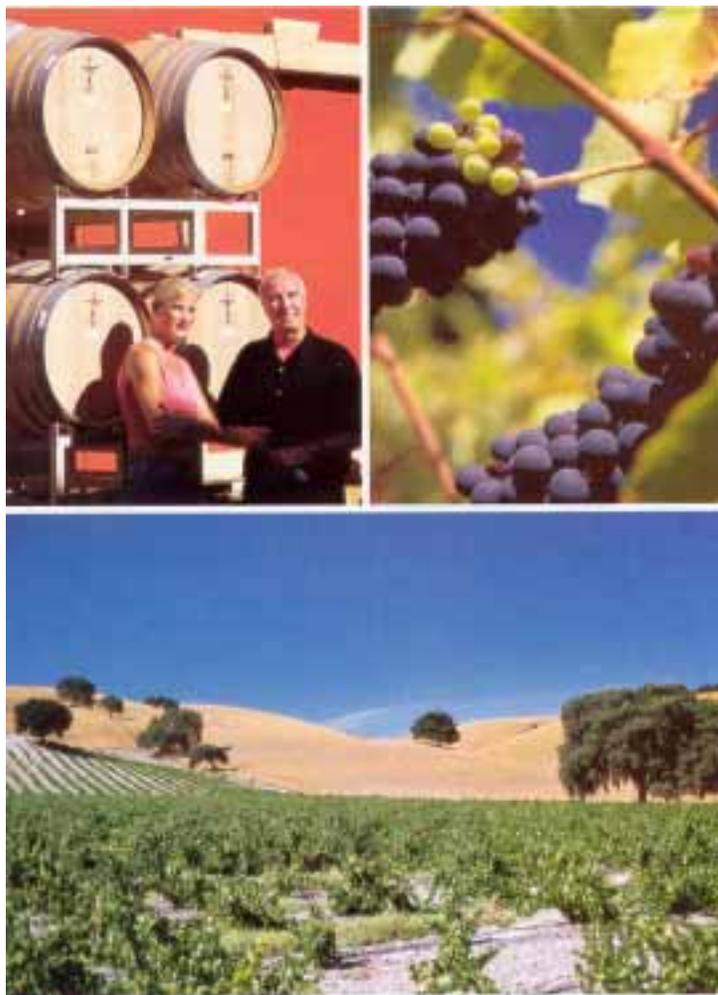
If Benny Dusi is firmly seated on his tractor, other Paso pioneers are virtually jumping off theirs. “Almost 20 wineries have turned over since I’ve been here,” says Peachy Canyon’s Doug Beckett. But what really generated a lot of talk and anticipation locally was the sale of the venerable Pesenti Winery and its vineyards to Turley. “We hadn’t intended to buy a winery,” says

**Syrah grapes in the James Berry vineyard, below; below left, Deborah and Justin Baldwin, with barrels, at their Justin Winery; bottom, a typical central coast landscape, with vineyards in the foreground.**

Turley winemaker Ehren Jordan. “We were looking for sources of grapes, and some people took me to Pesenti. I was pretty blown away by the vineyards: old vines, fairly well tended, on steep slopes.” Turley made an offer on the property, and the owners accepted it. Jordan now commutes by private plane between his jobs here and in Napa.

JUSTIN AND Deborah Baldwin are former Southern California bankers who bought a bucolic property on Chimney Rock Road in the foothills west of Paso in 1981, moved there in 1990, and have worked tirelessly ever since to make their vineyards, their Justin Winery, their small Laura Ashley-esque hotel, the JUST Inn, and their restaurant, Deborah’s Room, into class acts. Three years ago, *Wine Spectator* named Justin’s 1997 Isosceles, a Bordeaux-style blend, the sixth-best wine out of more than 11,000 from around the world released during the year 2000 (the wine was bested only by, in order, 1997 Antinori Solaia, 1997 Viader red, 1997 Whitehall Lane Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, 1998 Le Vieux Donjon Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and 1997 Joseph Phelps Insignia).

“There’s no doubt that our high ranking has helped provide a spike of interest in the area,” says Justin Baldwin. “It’s like a champagne bottle around here; the cork is getting ready to pop.”



**THE REGION’S ZINFANDELS**  
*are approachable and rich, says Paul Draper of Ridge, an expert on the grape*