

Discover Paso Robles' Booming Wine Scene

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With powerful yet balanced ripeness, tradition-bucking blends and a proud Wild West attitude, Paso Robles is one of the nation's—and some would argue, world's—most innovative wine regions. But this massive, diverse appellation in California's Central Coast, divvied up into 11 distinct districts just a year ago, may someday be known simply as one of the best.

Nearly every grape on the planet can find a happy home in its micro-climates, from Pinot Noir cooled by the coastal fog of the Templeton Gap District to Aglianico that's scorched by the blistering sun of the Paso Robles Highlands District. Yet the stalwarts **Cabernet Sauvignon** and **Syrah** (and their respective Bordeaux- and Rhône-style cousins) thrive throughout the region, from the shady, calcareous shale-crusted hills of the Adelaida District to the rocky plains of the Creston District.

The new subappellations, granted after seven years of strategic, collaborative planning, are just now starting to show up on labels, providing winemakers and drinkers deeper insight into Paso's wines. —*Matt Kettmann*

The Terroir

Paso Robles, established as an American Viticultural Area (AVA) in 1983, features 500,000 acres and an incredible array of grape-growing conditions. It offers 45 different soil series, elevations ranging from 700–2,400 feet, sea-breezy conditions in the west drying out to a desert-like climate in the east, and average rainfall from 8–30 inches. There are also incredible day-to-night temperature swings, thanks to the Pacific Ocean's influence from both the immediate west and much further north, down from the Monterey Bay. Given all this, it's amazing Paso Robles was ever considered one region at all.

The Grapes

More than half of Paso Robles is planted to Cab and other Bordeaux varieties, which were the only players when modern viticulture started here in the 1960s. However, much of that is sent to Napa and other regions to be blended. Today sees renewed focus on Bordelais varieties bottled in the Paso Robles AVAs, thanks to the Paso Robles CAB Collective network. By the mid-1990s, **Rhône varieties** were on the rise, and have rocked recent vintages both critically and commercially, while old-vine, dry-farmed Zinfandel, with some vineyards going back nearly a century, gains more intrigue with age. Beyond that, pick a grape—**Tannat**, Mission, Négrette, **Vermentino**, Ugni Blanc, **Touriga Nacional**—and it's probably already in the ground.

The AVAs

Like Napa Valley in the 1980s, Paso Robles uses “conjunctive labeling,” meaning that “Paso Robles” will continue to be prominent on wine labels coming from the region's subappellations. Sonoma County also mandated this type of labeling a couple of years ago. Here's a cheat sheet to familiarize yourself with the 11 subappellations that you may find in your local wine shop.

Adelaida District: Steep, calcareous-laden northwestern front in the Santa Lucia Mountains.

TRY: Adelaida 2013 Estate Pinot Noir; 92 points, \$25. This opens with aromas

of buttery stewed cherries, red currants, smoked pork and black slate. Notes of cherry pie, orange peel tang and eucalyptus flesh out the palate, finishing clean.

San Miguel District: Northernmost area, with deep sandy to clay loams.

TRY: *Domaine Degher 2010 Old School Estate Red*; 90 points, \$48.

Pomegranate and cranberry mesh with florals on the nose of this blend of 52% Grenache, 27% Syrah and 21% Mourvèdre. Indian spices add nuance to a vibrant, red-fruited frame.

Paso Robles Geneseo District: Heart of the region, north of El Pomar District, with alluvial granite.

TRY: *Bianchi 2011 Heritage Selection Syrah*; 91 points, \$26. Licorice, blackberry extract and a slate-driven mineral element power the complex nose. There's great tension between hearty, ripe olallieberry fruit and bitter plum skins on the palate.

Paso Robles Estrella District: Rolling plains of alluvial soils on the northeast boundary.

TRY: *Vina Robles 2011 Estate Petite Sirah*; 92 points, \$24. This sports stewed cherry, peppercorn and burnt toast aromas, with well-integrated flavors of mocha, espresso and black cherry.

San Juan Creek: Deep sandy soils on the hot, dry eastern border.

TRY: *Clayhouse 2013 Red Cedar Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon*; 89 points, \$14. Aromas of black-plum jam, dark strawberry and graphite dance on the lively nose. The palate brings pungent blueberry and black cherry, along with crushed black-lava rocks and pencil shavings right down the middle.

Paso Robles Willow Creek District: Mountainous, cool and calcareous, squeezed between the Adelaida and Templeton Gap Districts.

TRY: *Jada 2012 Hell's Kitchen*; 93 points, \$54. With 55% Syrah, 27% Grenache, 17% Mourvèdre and touches of Viognier and Roussanne, this offers violet, mocha, black cherry, slate and coffee on the nose. That's followed by mouth-coating tannins and tart flavors of cherry and boysenberry, boosted by smoke and licorice.

Templeton Gap District: Slopes of the Santa Lucia range, opening onto the Pacific, with loam to calcareous soils.

TRY: *Zenaida 2012 Zephyr*; 91 points, \$37. This blend of 55% Syrah, 40%

Zinfandel and 5% Viognier shows a complex nose of violet flowers, roasted game and hickory smoke, followed by crisp black currant flavors, with oak, leather, pepper and slate minerality.

Santa Margarita Ranch: Very far south, with steep slopes, varied soils and weather cooled from the south, owned almost entirely by Ancient Peaks Winery.

TRY: Ancient Peaks 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon; 92 points, \$18. Blackberry, violet, black pepper and dark chocolate scents fill the bouquet, while flavors of fresh black cherries, blueberries, fennel and tarragon abound on the palate.

El Pomar District: Terraces of sandstone, loam and clay between the Creston and Templeton Gap Districts.

TRY: Pulchella 2013 Red, White & Blue; 91 points, \$34. A field blend of 56% Zinfandel, 41% Alicante Bouchet, 2% Burger and 1% Orange Muscat that shows smoked pine wood, plum, incense, sandalwood and sour red-fruit aromas. Flavors mix cedar with smoked black cherries and mulberries.

Creston District: Eroded plateau, with sedimentary and granitic rocks between the Highlands and El Pomar Districts.

TRY: Chateau Margene 2010 Beau Mélange; 94 points, \$150. This blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot and 25% Cabernet Franc is beautiful, with aromas of blueberry, black cherry, turned earth and roasted vanilla bean. Dense notes of black-rock minerality and leather are laid across blueberry and prime-rib elements.

Paso Robles Highlands District: Hot and dry southeastern corner, home to French Camp Vineyards and quantity-focused vineyards.

TRY: Giornata 2012 French Camp Vineyards Aglianico; 92 points, \$30. Intriguing aromas of stewed plums, hoisin and vanilla bean cake lead the nose, while heady flavors of blue and purple fruit show great verve on the palate.