

A New Regime

MOVE OVER, SYRAH: CABERNET SAUVIGNON IS STEALING THE SHOW IN PASO ROBLES

by Michelle Ball / photos by Jeremy Ball

PASO ROBLES, a region once dubbed the “Rhône Zone” for leading the state in overall Syrah acreage, seems to have decidedly chosen its signature grape: Cabernet Sauvignon. According to the 2017 California Grape Acreage Report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the variety makes up 39 percent of all vineyard plantings in the appellation, compared to Merlot in second place at 14 percent and Syrah at just 9 percent.

All in all, Bordeaux varieties boast roughly 57 percent of all plantings in the Paso Robles AVA. While the dynamic region continues to rapidly expand both in recognition and in vine plantings, it's safe to say Cabernet Sauvignon is king here.

Located on the northern end of San Luis Obispo County, the appellation hosts nearly 100 percent of the Cabernet grapes found within the county's borders, with plantings of the variety increasing there by a sizable 60 percent since 2010. San Luis Obispo County surpassed Sonoma in overall Cabernet Sauvignon acreage, with 14,500 acres versus 12,329, respectively, as of 2017.



The Paso Robles CAB Collective is a grassroots organization formed to promote the recognition of Cabernet and Bordeaux varietal wines from Paso Robles through efforts like the 2018 CAB Camp sponsored by The SOMM Journal.

Calcareous shale, which dominates the soil profile of Paso Robles, helps promote acid retention.



Thriving on Paso Robles Terroir

What makes the king of grapes and other Bordeaux varieties so well-suited for success in Paso Robles? According to Eberle Winery owner/Winemaker Gary Eberle, the answer is threefold: “the weather, the soil, and now, the evolution of the winemakers themselves.” The famed vintner is often credited as a champion for Syrah, having planted the first Paso Robles vines of the variety in 1974, yet he says he arrived here explicitly to produce Cabernet. “Cabernet is, in my opinion, the finest wine that can be made from Paso Robles,” Eberle insists.

Known for its heat, Paso Robles regularly reaches triple-digit temperatures in the summer. The region’s proximity to the Pacific Ocean paired with its distinct orientation of canyons causes cool maritime breezes to settle in at night: In some spots, night-time temperatures can plummet 50 degrees. These diurnal swings are particularly advantageous for late-ripening grapes like Cabernet, as they give them more time to fully develop.

In addition to its advantageous climate, Paso Robles exhibits more than 40 soil profiles predominated by calcareous shale. “They’re high-pH soils, but they give you low-pH wines with beautiful, bright acidity,” says Brecon Estate Winemaker Damian Grindley. A former cave explorer, Grindley previously traveled the world to make wine for other producers; when he decided to launch his own estate project, however, he settled on Paso Robles specifically for its soils.

Fellow winemaker Eric Jensen, who owns the Paso Robles-based winery Booker, was similarly drawn to the region’s terroir, explaining that he tailors his methods to address its idiosyncrasies. “The ability to uptake [nutrients] is blocked in these high-calcareous soils, so we have to wait longer to harvest our Cabernet because we’re trying to balance the low pH,” he says, adding that he prefers soils with more water-holding capacity. “The better Cabernet sites, to me, are the ones that have the clay on top and you don’t hit that limestone for several feet . . . I’m looking for clay, but I can’t get away from the calcareous because that’s Paso. I just don’t want pure white.”

Known in the past for producing highly limited, cult-worthy Rhône varieties and blends, Jensen has since shifted focus toward Cabernet and Bordeaux-style wines, launching the My Favorite Neighbor label in 2014. He says he contracts with numerous growers who share his vision for the project as part of a “very close partnership.” Jensen adds, “I show them what I see in the winery, then I ask them to suggest how we can get better.”


The Paso Robles AVA encompasses a vast 613,000 acres: an area nearly three times the size of Napa Valley. Roughly 40,000 acres are planted to vines, yet that number continues to rise quickly as advancements in vineyard design give

producers access to higher-quality clones, rootstocks, and data.

These considerations certainly explain the influx of new plantings, producers, and high-quality wines coming out of the region. “Today, we have winemakers coming into Paso Robles who have their



The 1979 Eberle Winery Cabernet Sauvignon proves the great aging potential of Paso Robles Cab.

degree in enology; they’ve got years of experience working in wineries in Napa, Sonoma, and Santa Barbara,” Eberle notes. “They have the science, they have the art, and some of them have the love. And that’s why you’ve seen, I’d say in the last ten years, a sort of saltation and jump in quality of wine in Paso.” 

A longer version of this piece ran in the October/November 2018 issue of The SOMM Journal. It is being republished in advance of the upcoming Cab Camp, held March 31 to April 3 in partnership with the Paso Robles CAB Collective.

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