

Rediscovering Paso Robles: California's Bordeaux is 4 hours from O.C.



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It was a geeky meeting, even for a room full of sommeliers and wine journalists. Scientists used PowerPoint to talk about the arcane world of phenolic analysis. WineXRay, a company that provides quick and accurate readings of dissolved compounds in red wine, was on hand to explain its wares. And the wine being debated, obsessed over and ultimately tasted that day was the king of American viticulture, our answer to France's highfalutin Bordeaux: cabernet sauvignon.

You're probably thinking this meeting of serious fans, wine professionals, winemakers and winery owners took place somewhere in Napa - at tony Meadowood, say, or deep inside the caves of Opus One. Nope. I was in downtown Paso Robles attending last year's CABs of Distinction.

For Napa cab fans who haven't been paying attention, the area around Paso Robles has been producing cabernet sauvignon and other red Bordeaux grapes for quite a while. Believe it or not, more vineyards in Paso are planted with Bordeaux than Rhône grapes or zinfandel, which have been the region's biggest claim to fame in the wine world. According to the PRCC, cabernet sauvignon alone makes up almost half of all grapes grown across the 614,000-acre Paso Robles AVA. It was the Bordeaux blends at Justin Vineyards & Winery, in the northwest corner of the AVA, that first put Paso on the map as a quality wine-producing nearly 20 years ago, long before the Rhône Rangers rode into town and zinfandel had visitors merrily quaffing the cowboy way.

Here's a wine tour that will lead you to some of the best producers of cabernet sauvignon and Bordeaux blends all across the region, which has recently been divided into 11 sub-AVAs stretching from the arid flatlands in the east to the green foothills of the Santa Lucia Mountains in the west.

One of the charms of the area is that it's not Napa, at least not yet: While some tasting rooms look like French palaces, others are simply two barrels and a board plunked down in the bowels of a modest winery. And there are plenty of picturesque, rolling hills between stops in this vast and rugged region about four hours north of Orange County. It's convertible country.

CHATEAU MARGENE

Though they're attractive, the hills that surround Creston aren't the most picturesque part of the Central Coast, and the area doesn't share the cachet among oenophiles that other places around Paso Robles enjoy. But that's where winemaker Doug Mooney decided to realize his dream of making world-class Bordeaux. "For me, the goal has always been to make good cabernet, good Bordeaux," Mooney said during a barrel tasting in the winery behind his tasting room.

"That's always been the greatest potential of this area." Mooney produces only cabernet sauvignons, cabernet francs and a Meritage. Together with his second label, Mooney Family Wines, his output is between 2,600 and 3,200 cases per year.

Michael and his wife, Margene, took up residence on a hilly piece of property in the summer of 1998 and planted the 5.5-acre estate vineyard that fall. Chateau Margene's first wine was a 1997 cabernet sauvignon, with grapes from a vineyard in the Templeton Gap area and another vineyard off Airport Road just east of Paso Robles. Within a few years, Chateau Margene had found a solid following – about 70 percent of Mooney's output is sold directly to his wine club members – and it began earning scores in the mid-90s from Wine Enthusiast.

DAOU VINEYARDS & WINERY

When famous oenologist Andre Tchelistcheff visited a certain spot high in the hills west of Paso Robles, he declared it "a jewel of ecological elements" and predicted Bordeaux grapes would do extremely well there. Following his suggestion, Dr. Stanley Hoffman, a Beverly Hills cardiologist, purchased a 1,200-acre ranch in the area in the early 1960s and planted his first vines with Tchelistcheff's help. Hoffman Mountain Ranch Winery was the first modern commercial winery in Paso Robles, and Hoffman's cabernet sauvignon garnered him international respect.

In 2012, brothers Georges and Daniel Daou purchased part of the original Hoffman Mountain Ranch property, restored the redwood winery and concentrated on making Bordeaux. They now have almost 100 acres of vineyards in one of the most scenically spectacular places on the Central Coast. You can see for miles from the lawn outside the tasting room, which looks like a grand French chateau.

HALTER RANCH VINEYARD

Owner Hansjörg Wyss, a Swiss billionaire who purchased 900 acres of the old Smith ranch, renovated the property's historic farmhouse and began enlarging the vineyard in this undulating, picturesque corner of the Adelaida District. He now owns over 2,000 acres, but only 240 are currently in vine – Wyss is a good steward of the land and wants to leave most of his property as he found it.

Winemaker Kevin Sass spent 11 years at Justin, many of them as its principal winemaker. He decided to move on after a change of ownership. Halter Ranch was a logical fit. "It used to be the largest supplier of fruit to Justin, and it's not far away. I remember sitting at the top of the hill at Halter when I was 22 or so and thinking to myself, "Gosh, I would love to work here one day."" The 100 percent estate-grown Bordeaux and Rhône grapes are sustainably farmed in limestone soils.

J. LOHR VINEYARDS & WINES In 1986, winery owner Jerry Lohr committed to Paso Robles. He began planting cabernet sauvignon, merlot and other red varieties on what are now 2,000 acres of vineyards, and he established his winery a few miles east of town, north of the 46. Lohr says it was never part of his plan to create one of California's largest wineries. "I didn't necessarily want to be in the big leagues. It was just kind of by default that we've gotten as big as we are. I made a plan for 125,000 cases (per year). When I got there I said, "We can double that easily." When we were 250,000 (cases) I laid out a plan for 500,000. About every eight years we double." Lohr predicts he may hit 2 million cases per year soon. Though his wine runs the gamut from bargain to pricy, it's immaculately made and smartly styled to pair with food, thanks largely to his experienced red wine maker, Steve Peck.

JUSTIN VINEYARDS & WINERY

This is the winery that put Paso Robles on the map with superlative red Bordeaux blends. During a recent tour, head winemaker Scott Shirley smiled and gestured around at the sun-drenched vineyards behind the winery's handsomely appointed tasting room. "One of the reasons I moved here is because of the climate. It's perfect for ripening cabernet sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties - in my opinion, better than Napa."

Those are fighting words that belie Shirley's placid, low-key persona. But he backs up his assertion calmly and thoroughly. "There's plenty of sun and warmth, and then you've got that huge diurnal shift of temperatures. You can leave the grapes on the vines as long as you want because they're able to recover overnight from the previous day's heat, which allows them to retain their acidity."

VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY

The founder of this impressive winery and outdoor concert venue, Swiss entrepreneur Hans Nef, strives to bridge New and Old World characteristics with his award-winning Bordeaux blends. "The reason Hans is here, and the reason I'm here, is that Paso is one of the most promising wine regions in the world," principal winemaker Kevin Willenborg said. "Every harvest I feel I'm closer to understanding how to reach that potential. I've been fortunate enough to work with the best people in the business over the last three decades."

Willenborg's resume is equal to the task: He has worked with Louis P. Martini, Michael Martini, Tchelistcheff and Stephane Derenoncourt. He thinks the breadth of his experience, and his French training in particular, have been crucial to his success at Vina Robles.

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