

TRAVEL

Perugia by way of Paso Robles

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Posted on April 9,
2018

Updated on July 10, 2022



Earlier this month I left my husband. That is, I left him to take a trip with our daughter to celebrate nearly completing her first year of graduate school.

Desiring Perugia's peaceful tranquility sans jetlag, we drove to Paso Robles. Just like Perugia is overshadowed by Tuscany, Paso is eclipsed by Napa. This is a mammoth mistake for wine lovers and foodies alike. Huge. No small wonder TripAdvisor identified Paso as a destination on the rise for 2018 and Forbes listed it as one of 2018's best travel values.

Downtown Paso is a throwback to a simpler era. Without one single parking meter, it has inspiring galleries, quaint tasting rooms like "Wine o'clock," and charming boutiques surrounding its central park. With over 400 wineries producing cool-climate grapes, there are fine choices available for every oenophile.



The Bed

The twenty-acre Allegretto Vineyard Resort has 177 spacious, well-appointed rooms, yet its Italianate design, fire-pit freckled courtyard, and cabana-clustered pool and Jacuzzi feels less like a hotel and more of a retreat to a cheerful uncle's country Tuscan villa. Housing a museum worthy art collection, Allegretto is also perfectly situated for a solitary run amid the vineyards or two can borrow one of their complimentary tandem bicycles.



Make sure and taste some of Allegretto's estate wines. Its 2013 Zinfandel with white pepper and ginger notes from its Loma Linda Vineyard was excellent. Its Ayers Family Reserve smooth finish 2014 Cabernet from its Willow Creek vineyard had me dreaming of my inner vintner. Allegretto is also just a five-minute drive from downtown Paso. 2700 Buena Vista Dr., Paso Robles, 805/369-2500.

The Meals

Dining at Allegretto's Cello Ristorante was delightful. Chef Justin Picard's crispy pork belly with red wine poached pear and cranberry-orange gastrique made me swoon. The Australian lamb rack with pomegranate demi-glace was so tender my knife was unneeded table jewelry.

The Hatch in downtown Paso epitomizes the town's warm ambience while serving creative, satisfying comfort food possessing an elegant edge combined with hearty flavor. The beet salad with chèvre and pistachio butter silenced me it was so delicious. The lean, tender chicken served with two sauces, creamy buttermilk and a fermented hot sauce with three types of chili was outstanding. The buttery, white cheddar grit dish was

like nothing Jimmy Carter ever tasted down south. The Hatch's congenial mixologist Robin poured me a "Land Down Under." This vodka, kiwi, passion fruit concoction tasted like Oceania and had me dreaming of New Zealand. 835 13th St., Paso Robles, 805/221-5727.



Just 10 minutes from downtown Paso is DAOU vineyards. It's a great place for lunch and remarkable wines. With expansive views overlooking Paso's breathtaking Adelaida District, it's arguably the region's most gorgeous vineyard. Lebanese-born brothers Georges and Daniel came to Paso by way of France, and have created a magical tasting environment that pays homage to the terroir they clearly love.



At DAOU try the Mezze plate to complement the wine tasting and pair Chef Cody Thomasson's seared sea scallops with DAOU 2016 Reserve Chardonnay or Wagyu skewers with DAOU's elegant 2014 Reserve Zinfandel (92 points Wine Enthusiast). Once you taste DAOU's 2015 Estate Soul of a Lion (76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13% Cabernet Franc and 11% Petit Verdot), you may never leave Paso. 2700 Hidden Mountain Rd., Paso Robles, 805/226-5460.

The Finds

Wanting to also enjoy the great outdoors, a 30-minute drive from Paso brought us to Santa Margarita Ranch, a 140,000-acre ranch owned since 1998 by three families. Within the ranch are 1,000 acres of planted grapes containing 16, mostly red varietals. The ranch is also home of Margarita Adventures, which has a six-station zip line tour, kayak tours and wildlife Hummer tours.



We opted for the zip line tour. This was especially enjoyable as some of the six stations zip right through the jade-colored vineyards permitting intoxicating views. Indeed, the last line is called the Pinot Express that was fitting as we zipped over those beautiful pinot vines. We also saw several hawks and a golden eagle amid Sycamore, Willow and Walnut trees and a 350 year-old legacy Oak tree. With multiple microclimates, many areas of the ranch are about 20 degrees cooler than surrounding areas, producing those excellent pinot noir grapes. 22719 El Camino Real, Santa Margarita, 805/438-3120.



Afterwards we stopped in at Ancient Peaks Winery, also owned by the ranch. These vineyards, the southernmost in the Paso region, possess five distinct soil types resulting in some truly marvelous wines. With an excellent charcuterie and cheese plate, we sampled several wines. Superior standouts were the 2015 Renegade with hints of deep berry (93 points Wine Enthusiast and Editor's Choice) and 2014 Oyster Ridge possessing textures of blackberry and dried plum (92 points Wine Enthusiast). 22720 El Camino Real, Santa

Margarita, 805/365-7345



Not quite ready to leave the vines behind, on the way back down the coast, we stopped at nearby San Luis Obispo. Five minutes later we were in a 1909 schoolhouse at the Niven Family Wine Estates. Amid glorious views outside while seated on schoolyard tables resembling those of our youth, we had quality problems: we loved everything we sampled. To solve such serious problems, I ended up taking home two cases of Niven's clean, crisp and delightful 2015 Tangent Albarino. 5828 Orcutt Rd., San Luis Obispo, 805/269-8200.



The Lessons Learned

Head to Paso and its environs while the region still possesses genial residents, plentiful free parking, top-notch restaurants and of course, those fabulous cool climate wines. You, your wine refrigerator and your friends will be glad you did.

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