

PASO ROBLES MIGHT JUST RIVAL NAPA WHEN IT COMES TO REDS

The region is gaining recognition as one of California's best sources of Bordeaux-style wine.

By SARA L. SCHNEIDER



Chaz Roberts

Napa is like the Hollywood of winemaking: Its name alone evokes its craft, and its annual releases are eagerly awaited. But a new carpet of reds is rolling out in Central California as sleeper region Paso Robles gains increasing recognition as one of the state's best sources of Bordeaux-style wine. Bottles of its Cabernet Sauvignons are now regularly earning critics' scores in the mid- to high-90s and competing with the best of California—and France.

Modern winemakers have been laying down roots in this old ranching countryside for more than 50 years, producing passable, if not quite impressive, Cabs and Rhône varieties. But the region's real eureka moment came in 1999, when Daniel and Georges Daou, cofounders of Daou Vineyards, realized Paso's winning blend of Bordeaux-style soils and Napa-like climate (minus some of the rain) and began their search for the ideal spot. Combining that rare formula with

the exacting winemaking practices of more established regions, the brothers aimed to produce wines that would pass the ultimate blind test—and 20 years later, they actually do. "I challenge anyone to open their favorite Napa Cab with our Reserve Cabernet, and you'll be astonished at the quality it delivers in comparison," Daniel says.



The Tasting Room at Daou Vineyards.
Chaz Roberts

To paint an enormous region like Paso Robles in broad strokes, of course, is to undercut its strengths. Encompassing roughly 614,000 acres—of which about 40,000 is planted with vineyards—the nascent wine country is larger than Napa and Sonoma combined. Such volume comes with a welcome wealth of diversity. “The diurnal shift here is amazing,” says Jason Haas, partner and general manager of Tablas Creek Vineyard, which produces some of Paso’s best Rhône-style blends. “[It’s] the largest of any winegrowing region in North America.” The upshot, according to Haas, is a whole lot of variation—warm enough for late-ripening grapes like Mourvèdre yet cool enough for Syrah and Viognier. “I don’t think there’s anywhere else in the world—and I’m including the Rhône Valley itself in this comparison— where the full array of Rhône grape varieties is compelling each year, vintage after vintage.”

And with each vintage, Paso Robles also becomes a little less obscure. Daou alone is seeing upwards of 50,000 visitors per year, and top producers have begun holding back their best bottles for loyal insiders. Better stock up now—before Paso becomes the next big blockbuster hit.