

THINGS TO DO

Good Libations: 2013 vintage could be the toast of Paso Robles



Paso Robles cabernets and other Bordeaux varietals from 2013 are looking strong, based on taste tests and chemical analysis of phenol content.

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I recently returned from my favorite California wine region, Paso Robles. It was my third visit in a month, this time to cover the CABS of Distinction trade and media get-together.

It was a fantastic month of winery visits and interviews. I got to tour the spectacular new cave at Saxum with its legendary owner-winemaker, Justin Smith. I had a long lunch with Jerry Lohr and his red wine guru, Steve Peck. I poked around Epoch with owner Bill Armstrong, who is meticulously restoring the 19th-century York Mountain winery, stone by careful stone. I toured Niner's state-of-the-art facilities with Andy Niner (the son of owner-founder Dick Niner, one of the first deep-pockets outsiders to swoop into Paso), who has assembled a great team of vintners and vastly improved his winery's formerly so-so product.

But the most exciting news out of Paso is the 2013 vintage. For reds, and Bordeaux varietals in particular, this could be a year to remember – the Central Coast's version of 1982 for Bordeaux.

For those of you who geek out on the science side, the phenolic numbers are considered phenomenal. (Phenolics are the hundreds of chemical compounds found in grape seeds, stems and skins that affect the taste, color and mouthfeel of wine.) At a seminar on phenolics that week, all phenolic measurements showed that 2013 was a standout compared with other recent years.

But this is what really got my attention: Even the veteran winemakers are using superlatives.

"I've never seen a year like 2013," said Michael Mooney, who founded Chateau Margene and has been producing high-quality, Bordeaux-style wines since the '97 vintage. "The weather was as perfect as you could hope for – no freezes in the spring, no late temperature spikes in the fall, no unexpected rain but just enough precipitation."

I remember winemakers were thanking their lucky stars two years ago that they weren't getting a repeat of 2011, a horrible year for Central Coast wineries that was cursed with all manner of nastiness, including a disastrous April freeze.

My tasting experiences confirmed the winemakers' rosy reports. Mooney's 2013 reds were beautifully balanced and structured, and his intelligent use of new technologies and practices with oak barrels has added intriguing subtlety to his wines. Lohr's extensive cabernet sauvignon lineup is similarly strong for the '13 vintage. There's a huge amount of punch to the 2013s, and I predict they'll age well.

Paso, which produces a lot more Bordeaux than Rhone grapes, is ideal cab country. Among its best, the flavor profile is superior, with less assertive tannins, more luscious fruit and greater complexity than many Napa cabs with bigger price tags. In terms of soil, climate, meteorological consistency, hang time and diurnal swing, parts of Paso are perfect for cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot, merlot and other Bordeaux varietals. That's what got Dr. Stanley Hoffman and other pioneers interested in the place back in the 1960s and '70s, long before the zinfandel and Rhone crazes swept through. Contact the writer: 714-796-7979 or phodgins@ocregister.com