

■ THE SOMMELIER JOURNAL

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER • 2018  
\$10.00 US/\$12.00 CANADA

# THE SOMM JOURNAL



## ITALIAN *Style*

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# GAINING GROUND

## PASO ROBLES

**NIPS AT THE HEELS OF NAPA IN OVERALL  
ACREAGE OF CABERNET SAUVIGNON**

**BY MICHELLE BALL / PHOTOS BY JEREMY BALL**

PASO ROBLES CURRENTLY GROWS 14,500  
ACRES OF CABERNET SAUVIGNON.



BOOKER OWNER/WINEMAKER ERIC JENSEN BELIEVES THE COMBINATION OF PASO ROBLES' SOIL AND CLIMATE ALLOWS FOR A LONGER CABERNET SAUVIGNON HANG TIME WITHOUT AFFECTING ACIDITY.



CALCAREOUS SHALE, WHICH DOMINATES THE PASO ROBLES SOIL PROFILE, HELPS PROMOTE ACID RETENTION.

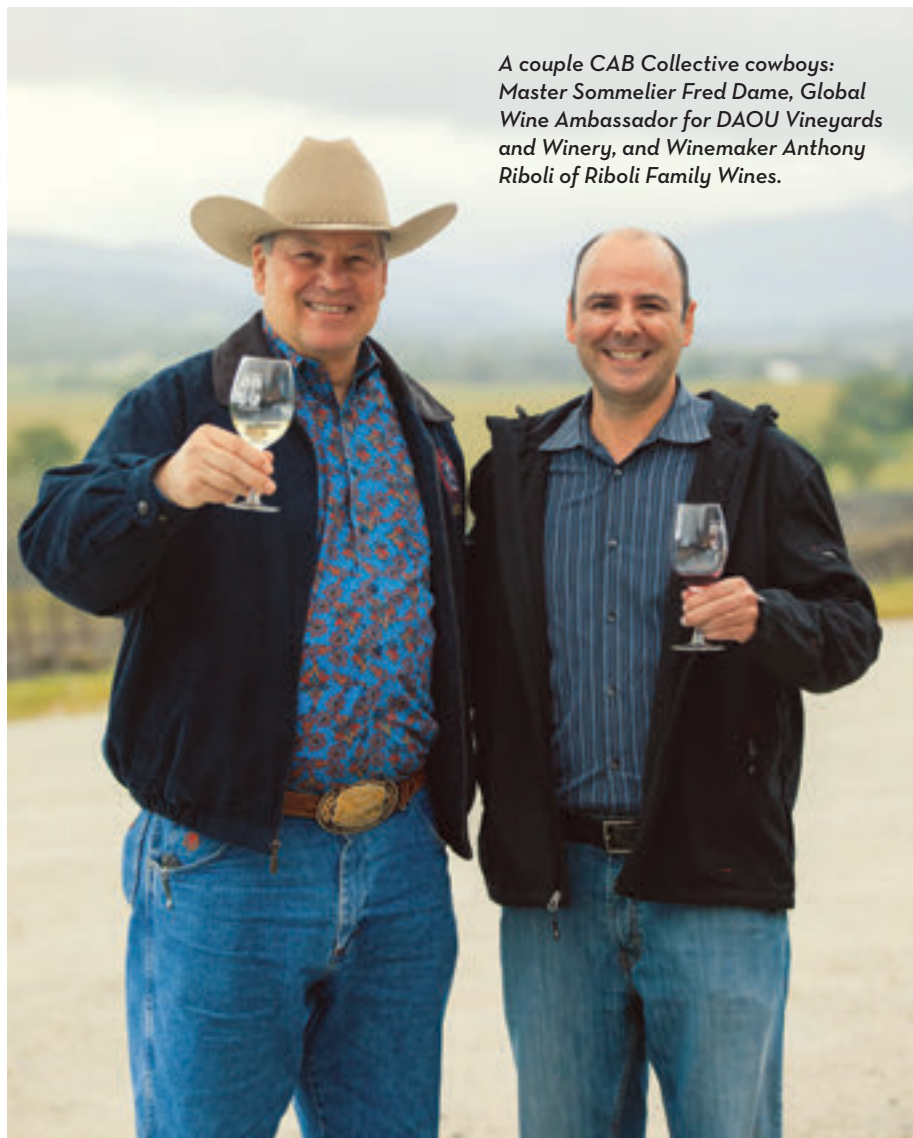
**PASO ROBLES** was once dubbed the “Rhône Zone” for leading the state in overall Syrah acreage, but the terroir seems to have decidedly chosen its signature grape: Cabernet Sauvignon. The variety makes up 42 percent of all vineyard plantings in the appellation compared to the other red Bordeaux varieties at 15 percent and red Rhône varieties at 14 percent, according to the 2017 California Grape Acreage Report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture,

All in all, Bordeaux varieties comprise 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 its borders, with plantings of the variety increasing in the county by a sizable 60 percent since 2009. San Luis Obispo County has surpassed Sonoma in overall Cabernet Sauvignon acreage, with 14,503 acres versus 12,329, respectively, as of 2017. Napa, as a means of comparison, has 21,203 acres currently planted to Cabernet.

#### 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



*A couple CAB Collective cowboys: Master Sommelier Fred Dame, Global Wine Ambassador for DAOU Vineyards and Winery, and Winemaker Anthony Riboli of Riboli Family Wines.*

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 shales. "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 Booker winery, 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." "I show them what I see in the winery, then I ask them to suggest how we can get better," Jensen adds.

### Land Rush

The Paso Robles AVA encompasses a vast 613,000 acres: an area nearly three times the size of Napa Valley. Planted acres have risen as advancements in vineyard design give producers access to higher-quality clones, rootstocks, and data to meet demand.

"When we were planting back in 2001, there wasn't this type of analysis," says Niner Wine Estates owner Andy Niner, who recently planted an additional 25 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon in the Willow Creek sub-AVA. "The plantings going in this year are on the right rootstock for the soil [they're] planting into and there's a much broader clonal diversity," he explains, adding that after running an estate for 17 years, "you just inherently get smarter and the quality goes up . . . It's a combination of both experience and knowledge that's leading to the quality we have now that we didn't have ten years ago."

When J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines founder Jerry Lohr sought a new site for his Bordeaux-style wines, he found he appreciated the flavor profile indicative of Paso Robles Cabernets. The company planted its first vineyard in the region in 1988 and has emerged as one of Paso Robles' leading producers, currently farming an impressive 2,300 acres throughout the AVA.

"Our experience and expertise in Paso Robles has evolved since our first plantings in the 1980s, but has always been driven by a passion to create ageworthy yet approachable Cabernets and Bordeaux vari-



etals," says J. Lohr President/COO Jeff Meier, a veteran of 34 harvests alongside founder Jerry Lohr. "Pull a cork on some older vintages and you will find ten- to 20-year-old Cabernets that still retain their freshness, with Paso Robles' signature chocolatey tannins. They're approachable in their youth, but with the structure and finesse to age gracefully. I see even better wines coming from our newer plantings, which incorporate tighter spacing and optimum rootstock and clonal selection to produce concentrated, flavorful Bordeaux varietals rivaling the best wines in the world."

As further evidence of the region's budding future, one of the world's most recognized Master Sommeliers, Fred Dame, has recently joined Team Paso as the new Global Wine Ambassador for DAOU Vineyards and Winery. For years, Dame has participated in events with the Paso Robles CAB Collective organization in addition to attending the Wine Speak industry summit, making him intimately familiar with the region's wines. "I continue to be impressed by the quality every time I go back, and that tells me, a) we're just scratching the surface, and b) people are really taking the time and paying atten-



**DAOU Vineyards and Winery proprietors Daniel (pictured) and Georges Daou have worked tirelessly to promote Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon.**

tion to making world-class wine," he says, adding that the cost of real estate in the area is also quite attractive for producers compared to competing regions.

Jensen attests to Dame's claim: "I'm not going to mention names, because I don't want to get them in trouble, but I know no less than five high-end Napa winemakers that want to be here," he says. "Most of them will be here in the next few years, because they're priced out of the market there and they love this area."



**Renowned Eberle Winery Winemaker Gary Eberle launched his career in Paso Robles in 1973.**

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 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." **||**

***The Paso Robles CAB Collective is a grassroots organization formed to promote the recognition of Cabernets and Bordeaux varietal wines from Paso Robles through efforts like the 2019 CAB Camp, sponsored by The SOMM Journal and set for March 31-April 2.***

