

THE WILD WEST OF THE

WINE WORLD

THE **PASO ROBLES CAB
COLLECTIVE** BRINGS ITS
BOUNTY TO TEXAS

story and photos by Lori Moffatt

Due to their ageability, Paso Robles CABs (Cabernets and Bordeaux-style wines) sometimes require decanting.

CABs and smiles filled GRACE in Fort Worth, TX, as the Paso Robles CAB Collective showcased exceptional wines from its home region.



On a sunny day in mid-September, more than 20 winery representatives from the Paso Robles CAB Collective (PRCC) arrived in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex via a new direct flight from San Luis Obispo, the urban hub of Paso Robles, for a two-day Texas celebration of the ascendant California region's acclaimed Bordeaux varietals. Before hosting a dinner at the new Hotel Drover in Fort Worth's Stockyards District, the group kicked things off with a midday tasting for area sommeliers and wine buyers at GRACE, a fine-dining restaurant in downtown Fort Worth known for its modern American cuisine and extensive wine list. Here, attendees enjoyed a deep dive into Paso Robles' history, diverse terroir, family-run vineyards, cowboy culture, and tourism opportunities.

Established in 1983 with 17 wineries and about 5,000 vineyard acres flanked by the Santa Lucia Mountains along the Central Coast, the Paso Robles AVA now encompasses more than 40,000 vineyard acres and more than 200 wineries in 11 distinct sub-appellations. The region's varied topography, moderating maritime influence, and abundant calcareous soil—similar to that found in Bordeaux—distinguishes it from other California growing areas.

In 2012, to educate consumers and trade professionals about the region's history and potential, the PRCC was formed by wineries specializing in Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Malbec, Carménère, and, of course, Cabernet Sauvignon; it's since expanded to 23 members.



GRACE pulled out all the stops to pair great small plates with the PRCC lineup.



DAOU Family Vineyards senior VP—strategy and business development Maeve Pesquera, J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines co-owner and chief brand officer Cynthia Lohr, and Ancient Peaks Winery executive VP and second-generation owner Amanda Wittstrom-Higgins.



Eric Henry, owner of Summit Wine Tastings, LLC, was a guest at the PRCC's tasting event at GRACE.



Luis Velez, wine director at Stonebriar Country Club, won a trip to Paso Robles wine country courtesy of the PRCC.

"A benchmark profile for Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon is balanced acidity and really soft tannins that allow the fruit flavor to shine through," Cynthia Lohr, co-owner and chief brand officer of PRCC member J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines, told the audience as we discussed the featured wines.

As an event co-host with Ancient Peaks Winery executive VP and second-generation owner Amanda

Wittstrom-Higgins, DAOU Family Vineyards senior VP—strategy and business development Maeve Pesquera, and PRCC executive director Linda Sanpei, Lohr emphasized that the AVA's division into smaller subregions allows winemakers to tell their stories in a more meaningful way. "In large part, it's all about diversity," Kevin Eyster, division VP of sales at Hope Family Wines, told me. "In the 11

subregions, there is broad diversity in elevation—ranging from 700 to 2,200 feet above sea level—and annual rainfall, ranging from a slim 8 inches in the east [to] 36 inches in the west. All regions benefit from a dramatic diurnal temperature shift; our cool evenings act as a guardian of [the] elevated acidity and balance [that are] reflected in all varietals produced in Paso Robles."

"What's happening in Paso Robles

is really exciting,” added Pesquera, a native Texan who joined the team at DAOU after two decades as a sommelier in Houston. She referred to the region as “the Wild West of the wine world”: “Twenty years from now, I think we’ll all look back at the growth of Paso Robles and think, ‘I was there when this started.’ Wineries here are mostly family-owned and -operated, many [of them focused on] sustainable practices, Biodynamic winemaking, and regenerative farming. As buyers, you can feel confident placing these wines on your list, knowing that these are real people doing things they’re passionate about.”

Sommelier Rachael Ramirez, who works for a private resort as well as The Leadership Center at Deloitte University north of Fort Worth, grew up near Paso Robles; she said her childhood memories are full of horseback rides past vineyards set among the walnut trees. (In Spanish, *paso robles* means “pass of the oaks.”) “To me,” Ramirez said, “Paso Cabernet has a personality so uniquely Central Coast California. It’s reminiscent of dusty cowboys and fields of sun-ripened fruit. The wines are unpretentious, accessible, and delicious. For my money, it’s one of the best deals in terms of quality-to-price ratio.”

“This is my first time in Texas, but I’m a cowgirl,” said Wittstrom-Higgins, whose family oversees the southernmost vineyard in the Paso Robles AVA. “We run cattle, farm hay, and grow pistachios; our single-estate vineyard sits on the edge of [Ancient Peaks’] ranch.” Here, only 14 miles from the ocean, calcium-rich soils from fossilized oyster shells contribute pronounced minerality to the wines. As the group tasted several Ancient Peaks offerings, Wittstrom-Higgins passed around soil samples for us to examine and explained that Paso Robles has more than 30 different soil types. “What’s interesting about California is we have an extremely tortured geology,” she observed of the powerful geological activity that formed the state. The division of the AVA into smaller subregions, she continued, allowed winemakers to focus on the nuances of terroir in each area.

It doesn’t escape me that Paso Robles has a lot in common with Texas: an expansive footprint with influences



Top DFW buyers and sommeliers were eager to learn about Paso Robles wines.



Educational seminars were hosted by representatives from the PRCC.

that range from 18th-century Spanish settlements and ranching to a varied topography and a wine industry that’s somewhat underestimated, though that’s changing in both regions. How interesting to learn that enologist André Tchelistcheff, who helped supervise some of Paso Robles’ first significant plantings in the 1960s and 1970s, also lent his expertise to influential Texas winemaking pioneers Susan and Ed Auler. I wonder if there’s something metaphysical that makes Texans so receptive to the plush, bright Paso Robles flavor profile—though perhaps it’s simply because the approachable style complements many of the state’s popular cuisines and dishes, barbecue

and steak among them. “As a buyer in Texas, [I found] my people loved Cabernet,” Pesquera said. “So let’s find them something new and different they can fall in love with; let’s find their new favorite wine. That’s always a pleasure for a som, right?”

“Clearly, Texas is not only geographically and culturally important, but we also recognize the diversity of the culinary experience here,” Lohr offered. “We know that Texans want to know what is next, what is innovative, what is delicious, what is affordable and yet ageworthy, and what they can share with friends and family. And there’s nothing like Paso Robles in terms of Bordeaux varieties and blends.” **LT**