

[Destination Paso Robles](#)

Between Los Angeles and San Francisco, this burgeoning wine region offers small-town charms and pastoral scenery

Tim Fish

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Paso Robles is not the quiet, sleepy place it used to be. As the surrounding wine region blossoms into one of the most dynamic in California, this Central Coast community is becoming a hot destination, worthy of the most discerning wine and food travelers.

But even with its new tasting rooms, luxury lodgings and wine-friendly restaurants, Paso Robles retains the charms of a small American town: a shady downtown square, a countryside devoted to agriculture, and a slow, easy pace.

Paso Robles (Spanish for Pass of the Oaks) lies midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco along Highway 101, about 25 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. It is, by big-city standards, in the middle of nowhere.

That hasn't stopped it from being a destination since the earliest days of the local Salinan Indians, who came to Paso Robles to enjoy its natural hot springs. The Southern Pacific Railroad fueled the city's early growth, and by the late 1800s Paso Robles had developed a Wild West reputation. In fact, Drury James, uncle of outlaw Jesse James, was one of the city's founders.

Wine grapes were first planted in the area in 1797 by Franciscan friars, but the groundwork for the modern wine industry was laid in the 1920s when immigrant farmers planted Zinfandel vines that still produce wine today. In the 1960s and '70s, intrepid vintners such as Stanley Hoffman and Gary Eberle helped establish the region's modern industry.

The Paso Robles American Viticultural Area, created in 1983, is the third largest and one of the fastestgrowing

in California. There are about 26,000 acres of vines planted-about 38 percent of that to Cabernet Sauvignon alone-and while much of the harvest still goes into mass-marketed blends labeled Central Coast or California, most of the more than 180 wineries are open to the public.

The benchlands east of Highway 101 were the traditional grape source for Paso-as locals simply call it but that began to change in the 1990s when winegrowing increasingly shifted westward, to sites where the heat of summer is tempered at night by cool air and fog from the Pacific and where the rolling hillsides are laced with rocky limestone and calcareous shale that lend the wines depth and natural acidity.

"There's really something special about this neighborhood," says Linne Calodo winemaker Matt Trevisan of the area around Highway 46 and Vineyard Drive in western Paso Robles.

With the shift west, Paso Robles in the past decade has emerged as the Central Coast's quality leader and a mecca for winemakers pursuing Rhône-style wines. "We used to chase the Napa universe," says Chris Tietje, winemaker of Four Vines, "but we've finally found what we do well."

Syrah has been the crucial grape in the migration. One of the most influential projects is Tablas Creek Vineyard, a partnership that includes the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel in Château- neuf-du-Pape. Using vines from Beaucastel, Tablas Creek began planting vineyards in the early 1990s and was among the first to produce Rhône blends such as its Esprit de Beaucastel (Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah and Counoise) and Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc (Roussanne, Grenache Blanc and Picpoul Blanc). It has also busily supplied vine cuttings for propagation at other wineries.

There are two schools of thought about how best to use Syrah. Some top new producers-Denner, Terry Hoage and Four Vines, for example-bottle Syrah largely as a varietal. Others follow the Rhône tradition of blending, sometimes even mixing in Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel. Among these are established wineries such as Saxum, L'Aventure and Linne Calodo, as well as newer players such as Caliza, Epoch and Booker.

"It's about balance. There's a bit of elegance to be had by combining different varieties together," says Trevisan, whose wines include the Syrah-dominated Nemesis and a Zinfandel, Syrah and Mourvèdre blend called Problem Child.

Saxum winemaker Justin Smith takes his lead from each vintage and adjusts his blends from year to year. The James Berry bottling-harvested from his family's dramatic hillside vineyard-has been a Syrahbased

wine in the past, but the 2007 is largely Grenache. "It keeps me loose to make whatever is the best wine," Smith explains.

While Paso Robles is a large AVA, it is fairly simple to explore, whether you're looking for a wine discovery or revisiting familiar and respected players. Also on the west side is that well-known house of Zinfandel, Turley Cellars, as well as Justin Vineyards, which is successful with a wide range of wines and also has a small restaurant and inn. Venture east of Highway 101 and you'll find wineries such as Eberle (best-known for Cabernet and Zinfandel), Wild Horse, Robert Hall and Ancient Peaks.

Like so many California wine communities these days, Paso's downtown has become populated with tasting rooms, including Edward Sellers, Ortman Family and Clayhouse. Also not to be missed downtown is the Paso Wine Centre, an innovative wine bar that pours 48 selections from the region using a hightech dispenser.

With a population of about 30,000, Paso has an active downtown, with a number of historic buildings and plenty of shops to explore. Don't miss Powell's Sweet Shoppe, well-stocked with nostalgia and all the candies you loved as a kid.

Downtown is also the center of the restaurant scene. Two of the best, Bistro Laurent and Villa Creek, sit across the street from one another. Laurent is a casual bistro that offers reliable French-American food and a solid wine list. Villa Creek-which also has a highly regarded wine label-brings a touch of the Southwest to California cuisine, and its wine program takes in many local gems.

Two relative newcomers are Artisan and Thomas Hill Organics. Brothers Chris and Michael Kobayashi bring considerable passion and verve to Artisan, while Thomas Hill Organics relaxing outdoor courtyard is an excellent choice for lunch. And while there's no shortage of steak houses in the area, the best is McPhee's Grill, worth the short drive down Highway 101 to Templeton. It not only has a fine oak-grilled rib eye but also a value-oriented wine cellar and a hamburger that's not to be missed.

While Bistro Laurent and Villa Creek inspired the steady growth of fine dining a decade ago, upscale wine travelers had to rough it when it came to accommodations (a handful of charming country inns aside) until the recent openings of two full-service hotels.

La Bellasera, south of downtown, is conveniently located for wine touring at the hub of Highway 101 and Highway 46. It has a lively wine country atmosphere and Enoteca, a wine bar and restaurant. (If you're looking for value, consider the recently built Hampton Inn, next door.) Hotel Cheval is just off the square and feels more exclusive than La Bellasera, with 16 rooms set around an Old World-style courtyard.

The arrival of high-end hotels is the latest example of how Paso Robles has changed in the past 10 or 15 years. For those looking to the region's future, as Justin Smith and others are, the potential is just being tapped.

WHERE TO EAT

ARTISAN

1401 Park St.

Telephone (805) 237-8084

Web site www.artisanpasorobles.com

Open Lunch and dinner, daily

Cost Entrées \$24-\$28

Corkage \$15

Credit cards All major

There's energy to spare inside this Art Deco storefront. The open kitchen sets a lively tempo and the dining room is a dynamic space, sleek and minimalist in design with bold color accents. The food itself is California cuisine at its most vigorous, emphasizing intense flavors and local and organic ingredients interpreted by chef Chris Kobayashi (his co-owner brother, Michael, is the restaurant's general manager).

The wine list comprises a modest 100 selections, mostly devoted to local producers, and values are plentiful, with Denner 2007 Grenache selling for \$68 and Booker Remnant 2005 for \$50.

BISTRO LAURENT

1202 Pine St.

Telephone (805) 226-8191

Web site www.bistrolaurent.com

Open Lunch and dinner, daily

Cost Entrées \$25-\$37

Corkage \$20

Credit cards All major

France meets California's Central Coast at this downtown bistro. With exposed brick walls and polished wood floors, it sets a smart yet casual tone, and on warm evenings the small dining room spills into a

courtyard. After honing his skills in France, Laurent Grangien opened the restaurant more than a decade ago and draws a devoted crowd with satisfying bistro fare like black peppercorn beef and mussels gratin with fennel and curry. The wine list too blends France and California, offering about 250 bottles that spotlight Rhône-style wines. Prices are reasonable, with offerings such as Guigal Côte-Rôtie Brune et Blonde 2003 at \$100 and Alban Roussanne Edna Valley 2006 at \$70.

THOMAS HILL ORGANICS

1305 Park St.

Telephone (805) 226-5888

Web site www.thomashillorganics.com

Open Lunch and dinner, Wednesday to Saturday

Cost Entrées \$21-\$25

Corkage \$15

Credit cards All major

The phrase "farm to table" is taken seriously at this bistro and wine bar. Debbie and Joe Thomas grow organic vegetables, fruits and nuts in the hills east of Paso Robles and feature their bounty and other sustainable goods daily on the menu. An open kitchen is the focus of the small main room, while the outdoor courtyard is a soothing spot for a sunny lunch or early dinner. During the day, the restaurant features sandwiches on hearty bread, and salads such as hazelnut-crusting salmon with arugula and frisée. By night, thin-crust pizzas and entrées including crisp duck breast with chile relleno are on tap. The wine list has several dozen Central Coast selections, most available by small taste, glass or bottle.

VILLA CREEK

1144 Pine St.

Telephone (805) 238-3000

Web site www.villacreek.com/restaurant

Open Dinner, daily

Cost Entrées \$20-\$30

Corkage \$20

Credit cards All major

Award of Excellence

With its eclectic menu, warm Southwestern atmosphere and dynamic wine list, Villa Creek is a favorite among tourists and local winemakers alike. (Its bar is one of the busiest on the square.) Owner Cris Cherry divides his time between the restaurant and his Villa Creek winery and gives chef Tom Fundaro free rein in the kitchen. The menu features local and organic ingredients presented in rich, rustic and fullflavored

dishes such as butternut squash enchiladas and Oaxacan-style braised short ribs. The wine list holds about 225 selections, largely Rhône grapes and mostly local labels. Prices are typically less than \$75, and selections include Alain Graillot Crozes-Hermitage 2006 (\$58) and Talley Chardonnay Arroyo Grande Valley Rosemary's Vineyard 2007 (\$60).

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL CHEVAL

1021 Pine St.

Telephone (866) 522-6999

Web site www.hotelcheval.com

Rooms 16

Rates \$225-\$525

Situated just off the downtown square, this intimate hotel blends an Old World atmosphere with comfortable New World luxury. The courtyard, with its rough stone architecture, fountains and fireplaces, recalls a European village. The rooms are on two levels and many feature patios, high ceilings and fireplaces. All are done in rich but subtle tones, with wooden shutters and handsome bathrooms with granite highlights and large soaking-tubs. All the must-have gadgets, such as wide, flat-screen TVs, are at hand. Continental breakfast is delivered to the rooms, and the town's top restaurants are all a short stroll from the hotel, making Cheval an ideal choice for wine touring all day and leaving the car behind at night.

LA BELLASERA HOTEL & SUITES

206 Alexa Court

Telephone (805) 238-2834

Web site www.labellasera.com

Rooms 40

Suites 20

Rates \$179-\$663

La Bellasera is at the doorstep of Paso's much-lauded Westside, where most of the leading producers of Rhône-style wines are located. It has all the services visitors expect of a full-service hotel, with fashionably upscale rooms that have an assortment of layouts and amenities, including flagstone fireplaces, balconies, kitchenettes and whirlpool tubs with theatrical columns and vineyard-scene murals. Rooms feature overstuffed beds and sleek, modern bathrooms and are well-equipped with the latest hightech

toys. Enoteca is the hotel's three-meal-a-day restaurant and wine bar; just off the lobby, it's an easygoing space with a large fireplace and solid menu of California cuisine. La Bellasera is near the highway but is surprisingly quiet inside.

WINERIES TO VISIT

***Note:** When planning to visit a winery, it is best to call ahead to confirm seasonal hours and fees and inquire about tours, if available; some wineries offer extended tours by appointment.*

CALIZA WINERY

2570 Anderson Road

Telephone (805) 237-1480

Web site www.calizawinery.com

Open Friday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Cost Tastings \$5

One of the newest players in west Paso, Caliza is already producing a short list of impressive red and white blends. The name, Spanish for limestone, is a nod to the soils that dominate the area. Entrepreneur Carl Bowker launched a second career in 2002 when he planted 20 acres of vines in the south-facing hills of west Paso. There's a Rhône white blend called Kissin' Cousins and a Rhône red blend, Azimuth; both layer complex and intense fruit with crisp and earthy minerality. The tasting room is a stylish den where you're likely to find Bowker pouring.

FOUR VINES TASTING ROOM

3750 Highway 46 W., Templeton

Telephone (805) 237-0055

Web site www.fourvines.com

Open Daily, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost Tastings \$7

Winemaker Chris Tietje likes wines jammed with personality. His Zinfandels and Syrahs are full-bodied and hedonistic, yet each retains a distinctive sense of place. Paso Robles is his main grape source, but he harvests Zin from Sonoma for The Sophisticate and from Amador for The Maverick. While the winery is on the other side of Paso, the tasting room is located at the intersection of two major wine roads: Highway 46 and Vineyard Drive. It's a small but busy space, situated behind the gourmet country deli Farmstand 46, which Tietje and his partners also own. Snare a table outside and squeeze in lunch while you're there.

JUSTIN WINERY

11680 Chimney Rock Road

Telephone (805) 238-6932

Web site www.justinwine.com

Open Daily, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; tours by appointment

Cost Tastings \$10

Well off the beaten path but worth seeking out, Justin is the sort of showplace you might find in Napa, but the appeal goes beyond the visuals. Justin produces some of the best Cabernets in the area, particularly the Cabernet-blend Isosceles. Former banker Justin Baldwin and his wife, Deborah, were among the first to lay claim to west Paso, launching their winery in 1981. In addition to the fashionable tasting room, the winery also has JUST Inn Bed & Breakfast and Deborah's Room, a small restaurant with an Award of Excellence-winning wine list.

L'AVENTURE

2815 Live Oak Road

Telephone (805) 227-1588

Web site www.aventurewine.com

Open Thursday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Cost Tastings \$10

After making wine in his native France for 15 years, Stephan Asseo was lured by the promise and freedom of Paso Robles and launched L'Aventure in 1998, placing him at the forefront of a new wave of producers west of Highway 101. Asseo has about 56 acres (both Bordeaux and Rhône varieties) planted in the rolling hills around the winery, which is down a winding gravel road. The tasting room is a modest salon but offers L'Aventure's top wines, including a Rhône-style blend called Côte à Côte that has both finesse and muscle, and the Estate Cuvée, a blend of Cabernet and Syrah that's fleshy, focused and minerally.

LINNE CALODO WINERY

3030 Vineyard Drive

Telephone (805) 227-0797

Web site www.linnecalodo.com

Open Daily, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost Tastings \$10

With wines labeled Problem Child, Nemesis and Outsider, winemaker Matt Trevisan shows not only an independent streak but a dry sense of humor. One of the pioneers of west Paso, Trevisan makes blends of Zinfandel, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache. Thanks to the rocky, limestone soil of the region that gives the winery its name, the wines are dense, complex yet sinuous creations. "There's a bit of elegance to be found by combining different varietals together," he says. Each wine displays a singular personality; find your favorite as you sample them in the visitors center, a distinctively contemporary building done in geometric angles and polished cedar.

PASO WINE CENTRE

1240 Park St.

Telephone (805) 239-9156

Web site www.pasowines.com/retail.php

Open Tuesday to Sunday

This wine bar is an informative first stop on any tour of Paso Robles wine country. Located just off the downtown square, it has a fashionable urban atmosphere and features a high-tech automatic dispenser from which customers can sample any of 48 different wines from the region, many of them from hard-to-find

boutique labels like Saxum, Denner and Booker. Tasting fees vary widely, depending on the price of the wine and size of the pour. But the net proceeds go to a charity organization focusing on clean drinking water projects in troubled areas.