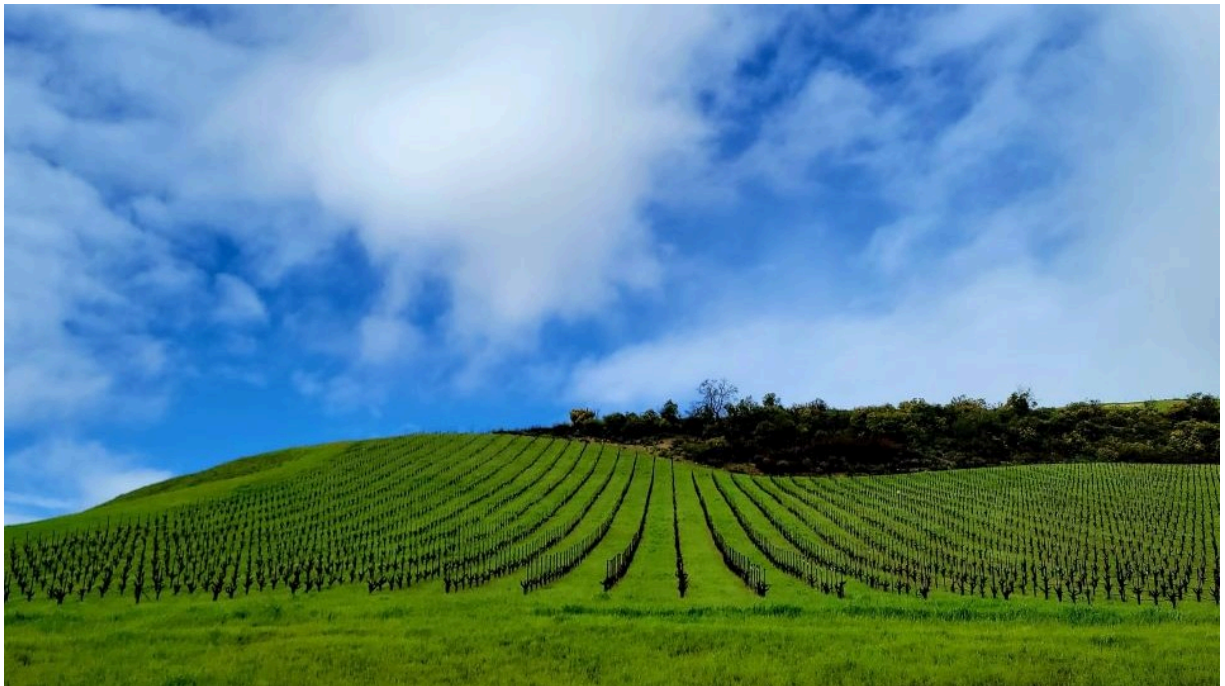


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## Paso Robles 2021-2023: Far From Typical

BY ERIC GUIDO | JULY 25, 2024

During my June 2024 visit to Paso Robles, most winemakers were excited about what they had maturing in barrel. They had left behind the 2020 vintage and the heavy rainfalls that washed out roads and saturated the vineyards in 2023 and were looking forward to future vintages.



*Villa Creek's regeneratively farmed vineyards.*

It's interesting to consider how climate change affects different parts of the world. We can't generalize that it is simply getting warmer. Any winemaker or grower will tell you that dramatic weather events are the real effect of climate change. When it rains, it's torrential. When it's dry, it's a severe drought. When it's cool, it's unseasonably cool for extended periods. Wine-producing regions worldwide are changing their way of thinking about the varieties planted in the vineyards, the elevations and expositions of the vines and the farming techniques. During my time in Paso Robles this year, many conversations revolved around climate. In most cases, producers were cautiously optimistic. The reason for this optimism is the series of vintages the region has

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winemaking practices in the area and, ultimately, how consumers perceive the wines. Alcohol levels are slightly decreasing. I believe this will be more evident in the 2023s during next year's tastings. There are several theories as to why this may be happening. One of the most logical involves the general warming of areas toward the east, which creates a vacuum as hot air rises and increases the cooling currents that sweep in from the Templeton Gap.

To paint the picture for readers who are just joining the conversation, Paso Robles is located along US Highway 101, halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, with the Santa Lucia Mountains defining its western border and the Cholame Hills to the east. When driving up North 5 from Los Angeles, as the highway turns east, you're crossing a desert. The only green around this route comes from well-irrigated plantations and nothing else. However, to the west, cool air from the Pacific Ocean is pulled across the Santa Lucia Mountains through the Templeton Gap due to warm air rising in Paso Robles. In this section, the forests are lush, and the average rainfall is high.



*Inventive bottle storage in the Saxum winery.*

In Paso Robles, it's common to experience daytime temperatures reaching as high as 100 degrees, followed by a drastic drop of 30-40 degrees at night. This push and pull allows the region to excel with a large array of varieties. Those shifts also help grapes retain acidity despite brutally warm temperatures during the day. To put this into perspective, Paso Robles witnesses an average of around 20 inches of rain a year,





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one as small, that can come close to successfully growing such a diverse array of grape types. While Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay are the most heavily planted red and white cultivars, you'd never know it when you visited the top wineries. For them, Rhône varieties take precedence. Clairette Blanche, Viognier, Roussanne and Grenache Blanc make up most of the whites, with Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Petite Sirah, Cinsault and Counoise filling out the reds. Most winemakers choose to blend, just as they do in the Southern Rhône, and then label their wines with fantasy names—I often wonder how it's possible to come up with so many catchy wine names without running out of inspiration. Luckily, the wines almost always have a list of the blend on the back label. Like the Southern Rhône, blending permits winemakers to make small changes each year to help find balance from vintage to vintage.

A good example would be in 2022, where Saxum added a larger amount of Mataro to offset the low yields of Grenache. Or a grape such as Counoise could be added to bring more spice and acidity. However, there's also no shortage of many other international grapes, from Merlot to Malbec, Tempranillo, Cabernet Franc, Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, and, let's not forget, some of the oldest plantings of Zinfandel in the country. The list goes on and on.



*The old-vine Zinfandel in the Dusi vineyard are some of the oldest vines in Paso. They were planted in 1925.*

## Two Out of Three Ain't Bad

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too early to assess the overall quality of 2023, its potential is evident, assuming that winemakers could adapt to such a wildly unique season.

The **2021** wines are impossible to ignore today and have the potential to over-impress in the coming decade or more. They are classic, powerful, structured, complex and long-aging. Add to that the inherent spike of Paso Robles acidity. Two thousand twenty-one was the second year of the three-year drought cycle that started in 2020. As a result, the vines produced lower yields, relatively small berries and thick skins with good concentration and intensity. Despite dry conditions, temperatures remained lower (by Paso standards) throughout the season. Jason Hass of Tablas Creek commented that the year was 10% cooler than average through August, September and October, resulting in a long growing season. He went on to explain, "We were able to pick at optimal ripeness without any stress." Jeremy Weintraub, winemaker of Adelaida, added, "Only two days in August and one day in September hit 100 degrees. More importantly, the vapor pressure deficit (VPD) remained low." (The vapor pressure deficit refers to the combination of temperatures and moisture in the air. If the air is incredibly dry, it will draw water from the vines.) Without any significant heat spikes through the season and extreme diurnal shifts, 2021 saw the highest average acidity in wines since 2011. When tasting, the quality of the year becomes quickly apparent. In nearly all cases, the 2021s need another few years to come around.

The **2022** harvest was the result of two major events. During the growing season, a late spring frost on May 11th drastically reduced yields at lower elevations, primarily for white varieties. In addition, the overall warm year and the third season in the drought cycle culminated in stressed, frost-beaten vines with uneven bunches ripening so fast during harvest that they risked becoming prunes. It's no surprise that winemakers don't enjoy recounting the events of 2022. Russell P. From of Herman Story half-jokingly stated, "The only good thing about 2022 was that it was followed by 2023". Yet, many winemakers made some pretty fantastic wines.



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*Herman Story's barrel aging and tasting room.*

For the most part, the 2022 harvest culminated in early-drinking, accessible wines built on elegance and ripe fruit. However, the heatwave that started right before picking—ten days of over 105-degree heat at the worst possible time—ultimately defined the vintage. This forced winemakers to quickly evaluate when to get their fruit off the vines best.

In some cases, wineries early harvested some of their white varieties. This rush created logistical problems throughout the region, including finding the workforce to help harvest, scheduling picking times with growers, and moving the fruit into the winery without running out of space and resources. Winemakers worked around the clock and had never seen their wineries in such a haggard state. Justin Smith of Saxum explained, “Success in 2022 depended entirely on how you handled the heat wave, with due diligence in the vineyards and sorting. We had to play triage.” What’s more, diurnal temperature shifts were nowhere near what Paso typically receives, with evenings that remained in the high seventies.

The unusual disruption in Paso Robles’ weather conditions in 2023 was a welcome trait. Instead of the typically hot and dry conditions Paso Robles is used to, 2023 brought significant rainfall and cool temperatures for the first time since 2011. The region received almost 50 inches of rain, which broke all records for precipitation. The long and cool growing season and ample water supplies in the soils allowed grapes to ripen



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*Paso Robles excels with Rhône varieties.*

In many cases, harvests lasted well into November. The resulting wines are intense and complex, with fresh acidity and notable minerality. At this time, I have tasted mainly whites and reds from barrel, but if these are any indicators, 2023 may be one of the most interesting vintages in Paso Robles history. With more important reds getting bottled, my concern is whether winemakers used to hot and extremely dry average vintages were prepared to capture the balance offered by this unique season. Only time will tell, and I can't wait to revisit Paso Robles next year to find out.

I tasted nearly all the wines for this report in Paso Robles in June 2024, combining producer visits and centralized tastings, plus follow-ups in our New York City office.

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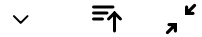
## Maha Estate

The 2022 Maha estate wines are pure elegance. Cris Cherry leads the Maha project, sourcing from the estate vineyard planted in 2012. As of 2022, it is now officially certified regenerative. The 2022s show more focus on fruit than in previous vintages. The Before Anyone Else, a varietal Clairette Blanche, is an immediate standout, a deeply textural wine yet full of energy. The two Rhône Blends, Backlit and Understory, show this site's potential. Cherry commented that being no-till helped a great deal in 2022, retaining moisture in the soils despite the dry warmth of the season. Any way you slice it, the 2022s are a wonderful success for such a warm season.

From *Paso Robles 2021-2023: Far From Typical (Jul 2024)* by Eric Guido

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### 2022 Before Anyone Else

Release Price: \$98

Color: White

Eric Guido, June 2024

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2029

93



The 2022 Before Anyone Else is remarkably pretty. A savory bouquet blends almond paste with mint leaf and sage before giving way to sliced nectarines. Crispy mineral-laced orchard fruits offset nearly oily textures in this this soothingly round and supple Clairette Blanche. It finishes perfumed and with a sour citrus tinge, just medium length yet spicy.

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### 2022 Understory

Release Price: \$98

Color: Red

Eric Guido, June 2024

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cinnamon sticks, dried violets and strawberries. It smooths over the palate with silken textures while maintaining a cool-toned and lifted feel, as crisp red berry fruits slowly drench the senses in primary concentration. Grippy and long, the 2022 finishes structured, leaving hints of exotic spice and blackcurrant that linger on and on. The Understory is a blend of 43% Carignan, 36% Grenache and 21% Mourvèdre. This understated beauty is simply stunning.

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## 2022 Backlit

Release Price: **\$98**

Color: **Red**

**Eric Guido, June 2024**

Drinking Window: **2025 - 2034**

**95**



The 2022 Backlit is youthfully coiled, slowly evolving with an array of dried violets, lavender, citrus zest and crushed blackberries. This supremely elegant red from Adelaida District floods the palate with silken textures. Ripe red and blue fruits, underscored by tactile mineral tones, add a pleasant grippiness toward the close. This tapers off spicy, leaving the mouth watering for more as blue and purple-toned inner florals resonate throughout. Dramatic length. The Backlit is a blend of 44% Syrah, 22% Petite Sirah, 17% Carignan, 11% Mourvèdre and 6% Grenache.

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