

R.H. Drexel: Paso Robles: The Ideal Wine Country Getaway

By R. H. Drexel

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Enological, Culinary and Spiritual Explorations of Paso Robles Wine Country

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Everyone is helpful, everyone is kind
On the road to Shambala
Everyone is lucky, everyone is so kind
On the road to Shambala.

– Three Dog Night

Located nearly midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, Paso Robles wine country is ideally situated for urban travelers seeking a getaway from big city living. Paso, as the locals call it, is one of the more innovative wine regions in California. Having long ago shuffled off its Paso-is-just-big-Zins-and-Cowboys identity, today's Paso offers a diverse food, wine and art culture.

Seemingly countless oak-dotted country roads welcome the adventurous, independent traveler to this vast, decentralized appellation. Winding through eleven sub-appellations, Paso's various wine trails unfold amid groves of olive and walnut trees, rolling hills and large, moss-covered boulders, made more mysterious when partially obscured by the occasional mist that drifts in from the nearby Pacific.

Where to stay

The heavy, wooden gate at the Inn Paradiso creaks loudly as it opens slowly to welcome guests. Charmingly anachronistic, it sets the mood for one's stay at arguably the most uncommon inn on California's Central Coast. One half-expects to find Alan Watts or Terence McKenna holding court in front of the big, sunken fireplace inside the inn's gorgeous, roomy lodge, built of reclaimed redwood railroad trestles and cedar siding. Custom ironwork, much of it whimsical, can be found throughout the property. Guests may roam the inn's two and a half acres, finding solace among ancient oaks, groves of olive and rare fruit trees and abundant beds of lavender, rosemary and sage. Three large citrus trees provide a relaxing scent and mood to the L'Orangerie Lounge, a community space where guests may mingle or read in peace. There are three aptly named suites inside the lodge: Octavio Paz, Carlo Mollino and Maria Sabina. Guests may also stay in the Gaudi Loft, the Paradiso Apartamento or the Art Studio. Built in the 1970s, there is a palpable counter-culture vibe coursing throughout the inn. Mid-century furniture, original photography, a rich array of artwork and antiques add great character to this sublime place. Innkeeper Tova Chesnin greets guests warmly, providing them with a quick walking tour of the property before leaving them to luxuriate in all it has to offer.

Paradiso Apartamento at Inn Paradiso

Travelers seeking a more mainstream experience may enjoy The Allegretto Vineyard Resort. Complete with a saltwater pool, full spa and sauna treatments on offer, a restaurant and bar, yoga and guided meditation classes, art tours and wine tasting, The Allegretto is ideal for guests seeking good old-fashioned rest. Visitors can find everything they need at this self-contained resort. A popular and unique feature is its Sonic Labyrinth. The first of its kind in the world, the Sonic Labyrinth provides guests a peaceful space to walk surrounded by a calming soundscape. Activated by motion sensors, soothing sounds play as one makes one's way to the center of the labyrinth. A nearby abbey is also available to spiritual seekers wanting a moment of solitude or contemplation.

The Sonic Labryinth at Allegretto

Travelers on a budget can find a clean, well-appointed room at The Oaks Hotel and Suites for just over a hundred bucks a night. A budget hotel, there's a serviceable bar in the lobby, and though it's a bit of a drive from the Paso town square, it's close enough to various points of interest, and you can't beat the price.

Where to Eat

Currently one of the most popular eateries on the Central Coast, Paso's Les Petites Canailles attracts food lovers from around the Golden State. Diners flock to this small, romantic French restaurant for signature dishes like the Burgundy Escargot Risotto, the Spanish Octopus with artichoke, sundried tomato, orange vinaigrette and puffed tapioca, the Kurobuta Pork Tomahawk with wild fennel pollen or the Whole Grilled Mediterranean Branzino with charred lemon. A dazzling wine list completes the dining experience, with vintages of rare wines from Sine Qua Non, Alban, Saxum and other benchmarks available. Pricey and hard to get into, a meal at Les Petites Canailles is a must for serious food lovers on the lookout for a memorable culinary experience.

La Cosecha

La Cosecha, located on Paso's charming town square (think Star's Hollow, but with better restaurants), features a Spanish and Latin-inspired menu. Their Pastelitos Catracho (Honduran empanadas) are a must, as are the Albondigas (Lamb meatballs) and the Paella. Their signature Caipirinha, with ypioca plata cachaça, seasonal fruit, lime and turbinado, is refreshing and zesty. Goshi Japanese Restaurant, tucked into a small mall off Pine Street, has arguably some of the best sushi on the Central Coast. Known for their sashimi and sushi, fresh Uni, Japanese Mackerel, Whole Squid and Tuna Collar, the small dining room is often booked well in advance and is popular with locals, especially the winemaker crowd. Los Robles Café is a great place to eat if you're on a budget. The Al Pastor tacos are a local favorite, and an entire family can dine there for under fifty bucks.

Where to Drink and Taste

Thacher Winery, located on Paso's Westside, offers up a collection of modern, delineated, precise wines. Their 2019 Cinsault at \$36.00 a bottle is a must-have, with freshness and zest for days. The Thacher Pet Nat, at the same price point, is another crowd pleaser. You'll want to grab a few extra bottles to give to friends back home. **Villa Creek, founded along the Peachy Canyon Road corridor, is arguably one of the finest Rhône-style wine producers in the United States. Winemaker/owner Cris Cherry consistently produces wines of beauty, balance and character at his organically farmed estate. His high-end Maha Estate wines, particularly the Bae (Before Anyone Else), made with 100% Clairette grapes, is one of the most beautiful white wines I've had from California for quite some time. A rare bird, this wine continues to change and evolve in the glass for hours. At \$100 a bottle, it still manages to over-perform. Serious lovers of white wines will want to seek out this unforgettable wine.** Just up the road from Villa Creek is Torrin, one of Paso's most riveting wine brands. Their 2017 Akasha Syrah is a showstopper, featuring Syrah from Bien Nacido Vineyards in Santa Barbara County and West Paso. An elegant effort, the Akasha is only one in a line-up of stellar wines, and any serious wine geek ought to stop by and see this promising property. Nelle, located just outside Tin City, Paso's urban wine trail, is a must-visit for music and Rhône varietal wine fans. Owner/Winemaker Tyler Russell, an avid vinyl record collector, spins tunes in his tasting room daily, while regaling visitors with well-told stories in his thoughtful, bohemian style. The 2018 Nelle Coastview Syrah, made from grapes grown at 2,400 hundred feet elevation near the Galiban Mountain Range, recalls the best efforts by Arnot-Roberts and is nearly bracing in its acidity and bright texture – perfect for cool-climate Syrah lovers. LXV, just off the Paso Square, offers a provocative, unique wine and food pairing. Conceptualized by owners Neeta and Kumal Mittal, originally from Mumbai, India, the LXV tasting menu includes pairings of their 2020 Semillion, grown in the Willow Creek appellation, with The Bells of Bali: Cilantro, Coconut, Shallot, Lemongrass, Myer Lemons, Garlic, Green Hatch Chili and other spices, rolled onto a soft piece of cheese. The results are surprising and delightful. Often led by Neeta Mittal, the pairing experience lasts for about an hour and is revelatory fun. A personal favorite pairing is the LXV "Secret" Bordeaux blend, comprising Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petite Verdot with The Perfume Garden: Hibiscus, Lavender, Persian Lime, Black Pepper, Coriander, Cumin, Black Garlic, again, rolled onto a soft piece of cheese. Seemingly counter-intuitive, the fla-

vors meld perfectly with the wine, and the result is something unexpected and new.

Where to Goof Off

Even ardent food and wine lovers need a little break from gustatory delights occasionally. Enter Sensorio, a breathtaking outdoor art installation by light artist Bruce Munro. Field of Light is a 15-acre walking experience, comprised of more than 58,800 round, stemmed spheres lit by fiber optics, illuminating the landscape in blooms of changing colors that follow the rolling, oak-dotted landscape. Light Towers features 69 towers composed of more than 17,000 wine bottles, illuminated with glowing optic fibers whose colors sync with a musical score. Powered by solar, these two exhibits are a source of wonder and awe for even the most seasoned of travelers. A food truck is parked conveniently near the entrance to the installation, as is an outdoor wine bar. Patrons may enjoy a glass of wine while walking through trails upon trails of magical light formations. It's a relaxing repast and a great way to end a long day in wine country.

Golfers will want to bring their clubs to Paso to enjoy Hunter Ranch Golf Course, 18 holes surrounded by century-old blue oaks and vineyards. Considered one of the finest courses on the Central Coast, it draws comparison in design to Pebble Beach and Cypress Point. Don't golf but want to have some low-impact fun? Check out the Whale Rock Disc Course, an 18-hole course that winds through an organically farmed vineyard. Participants at all levels of proficiency – including... well, none – will enjoy this outdoorsy, breezy bit of fun. Non-pretentious and enjoyable, disc golf is ideal for the entire family.

Recreational cannabis users will want to make a detour to nearby Morro Bay (a 32-mile drive from Paso), where the recently opened Natural Healing Center (NCH) Dispensary offers a wide array of flowers, edibles, beverages, vape cartridges and infusions. A helpful, well-informed staff makes purchases effortless. Visitors who partake of the righteous herb, or plan to taste, rather than spit their way through Paso, will be glad to learn that Uber and driving services are readily available throughout Paso Robles.

First-time Paso adventurers will want to visit the informative Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance website (<https://pasowine.com/>) prior to their visit. Up-to-date and easy to navigate, this website has loads of helpful information about the region's wineries and appellations, accommodations, restaurants, sight-seeing, and how to do it all safely and stress-free.

