

The 52 California wineries you need to visit in 2019

By Esther Mobley in The San Francisco Chronicle

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Today, California wine country stretches all over the state, no longer confined to the familiar stretches of Napa and Sonoma. If you're taking a road trip, you're more likely than not to happen upon a wine region. But with more than 3,600 wineries in California, according to Wines Vines Analytics, how do you choose where to spend your money, time and alcohol tolerance?

Allow us to help. Here at The Press, our team of wine experts has been busy visiting tasting rooms from Mendocino County to Paso Robles, determining which offer the highest-quality wines, the most fun experiences and the best bang for your buck. As always, we conduct these visits according to the same principle with which our parent publication, The San Francisco Chronicle, would conduct a restaurant review: We visit anonymously and pay our own way. The fruits of that labor are the hundreds of independently conducted, expert-written winery reviews published on The Press.

But you don't have time to read hundreds of winery reviews. So we've culled through our notes and come up with a collection of 52 — one for each week in 2019. This is not an all-time best-wineries-ever list; it's a group of places that we think represents the breadth and diversity of California wineries and tasting experiences this year. Whether you want an in-depth educational tasting, an Instagram-worthy setting with delicious bites of food or simply a cheap, quick and easy tasting bar, we've got you covered.

The Press' team of wine experts is led by me, Esther Mobley, and includes Virginie Boone, Matt Kettmann, Chris Macias, Sara Schneider, Tim Teichgraeber and Bryce Wiatrak. All of our work contributed to this feature.

Article has been abbreviated. The full article can be found at www.sfchronicle.com

PASO ROBLES AND AND SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

Adelaida

The jewel of Adelaida Vineyards is the HMR Vineyard, a high-elevation, limestone-studded site where some very unusual Pinot Noir vines, planted in 1964, are still thriving. Under the direction of winemaker Jeremy Weintraub, the winery's offerings are better than ever, offering a range of finessed, mostly Rhone-style wines that pack big flavors into light frames. At the modern tasting room you can choose from various experiences, from a basic tasting (walk-ins accepted) to a vineyard "tailgate" — but don't expect to see a football game.

Epoch

The Epoch Estate wines capture the essence of Paso Robles: bold, fruit-forward and dense, but always with enough structure and freshness for balance. The experience here is by appointment only and state of the art, in a refurbished historic building constructed in 1882 when the property belonged to York Mountain Winery (some bricks from 1906 still remain). When you visit, you'll get to taste through a range of wines from the 120 acres of estate vineyard owned by Epoch, including classic-for-Paso Rhone blends as well as Tempranillo.

Field Recordings

Andrew Jones is among the most experimental and innovative winemakers — and cider makers, for that matter — in Paso Robles today. One of the original residents in the vibrant Tin City complex, Jones offers his lineup of 20-plus wines in a funky, laid-back space. Field Recordings is his flagship brand, featuring a range of bright, easy-drinking wines from Chenin Blanc to Cabernet Sauvignon, though you may also see his Fiction bottles and his canned wine label, Alloy. Afterward wander over to Tin City Cider, a collaboration between Jones and Sans Liege winemaker Curt Schalchlin.

Giornata

Brian and Stephy Terrizzi, onetime Chronicle Winemakers to Watch, are Paso Robles' go-to interpreters of Italian grape varieties. He's the winemaker, she's the viticulturist, and together they're making delicious renditions of Nebbiolo, Aglianico, Sangiovese and more. You can visit them by appointment at their small Tin City tasting room, but now you can also find Giornata at Etto Pastificio (3070 Limestone Way, Paso Robles), the Terrizzis' new pasta factory, where they sell all manner of comestible Italian goods.

Halter Ranch

Halter Ranch may be a winery, but it is also a wildlife preserve of sorts. The property's owner, Swiss billionaire Hansjörg Wyss, planted vineyards on a small section of his 2,000-acre property that he hadn't conserved for the animals. Still, unless you take a vineyard tour (which is recommended) you're unlikely to see any mountain lions when you visit the tasting room, where you can taste through Halter Ranch's solid lineup of Rhone and Bordeaux-style wines.

Kukkula

Winemaker Kevin Jussila highlights his Finnish heritage at his highly personal winery, Kukkula, which means "the hill" in his native tongue. This ambitious project is centered on the 50-acre dry-farmed, organic, head-trained vineyard that Jussila planted himself, with a modern winery that nearly blends into the hillside. Pay attention to these thoughtful wines, many of them Rhone-style blends. (If you're looking for Pinot, the Kukkula "Noir" is not it; this dark-colored wine is a Syrah-Counoise blend.)

Tablas Creek

Tablas Creek made a big bet on the potential of grape varieties from France's Rhone Valley — Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and their companions — when it was established here in Paso's west side in the 1980s. A partnership between an American importer and a leading Rhone Valley winery, Tablas is notable not only for its commitment to beautifully balanced, Old World-style wines, but also for the fact that it was the first to bring much Rhone plant material into the United States. A visit to this bustling winery is a chance to taste the rainbow of southern France in the Central Coast: From Tannat to Clairette, there's truly something for everyone

Thacher

The Thacher property was once part of a horse farm, and owner-winemaker Sherman Thacher used to be a brewer in Los Gatos. Today, the property is home to a range of mostly Rhone-inspired vines and a modest tasting bar — though they do hold occasional parties in the hulking, 1920s-built barn where all the horses used to live.

Stolo

From the seaside town of Cambria, take a ride along the road less traveled to reach Stolo, a scenic tasting room nestled among hillside vineyards. Picnics are popular here (though it's a good idea to make a prior reservation for one of the tables), and there's a range of compelling wines — including one of the best Gewurztraminers in the region — but the star here is the Syrah, grown less than 3 miles from the Pacific Ocean.

Villa Creek

Villa Creek was a restaurant before it was a winery. Only recently, nearly 15 years after purchasing a striking 60-acre estate in Paso's Peachy Canyon, did restaurateurs Cris and JoAnn Cherry abandon their longtime restaurant to focus solely on the wine business. A visit here, by appointment only, is a chance to taste through a range of single-vineyard expressions of some of western Paso's most famous sites, though it will still be a while before you can taste the wines from the Cherrys' own estate, called Maha.