

# The Grit and Grace of Paso Robles

By MaryAnn Worobiec published in *The Wine Spectator*

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Great wine, delicious food and luxury digs come with small-town charm on California's Central Coast.

Paso Robles is no longer in the middle of wine's nowhere. The region has become a bustling destination, regularly attracting more than a million visitors a year for its world-class wines, modern tasting rooms, luxury accommodations and wine-friendly restaurants. Paso, as it's known among locals, has a quaint downtown, a ruggedly beautiful countryside and an infusion of new talent that makes it one of today's most exciting places for wine in California.

Located along Highway 101 midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles (about a four-hour drive from either) and about 25 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, the heart of the city of Paso Robles is its town square—an inviting green patch surrounded by restaurants, shops and more than 20 wine bars. On one end of the square, winemakers gather in the morning at Spearhead Coffee to discuss the weather over lattes. Across the green, the nightlife includes a Prohibition-style speakeasy located in the back of Pappy McGregor's Irish pub. Adjacent to that is the family-friendly SLO Sweets, a candy shop with a rainbow of treats from your childhood.

And something magical happens when you drive just 10 minutes from the town square—there are miles of winding roads, rambling vineyards, lichen-covered oak trees (Paso Robles means “pass of the oaks” in Spanish) and plenty of working farms to remind you that cattle were once the region's defining feature.

Much of Paso's charm comes from its cowboy roots and rustic vibe, but the region is evolving. Thirty years ago, there were fewer than 20 wineries here; now there are more than 200. A cattle drive used to run through downtown to kick off the California Mid-State Fair; now, boutique hotels and high-end restaurants featuring global cuisine are the draw. Tasting experiences have become more sophisticated, with sit-down offerings and library pourings.

Longtime residents are confident they can keep the relaxed feeling of the place, though. “It was a little more Wild West; now it's a bit tamer,” says Russell From of Herman Story, whose winery and tasting room lie near the town center. From's tasting room is regularly full of visitors sampling his distinctive wines, whose eye-catching labels carry memorable names such as Late Bloomer and Casual Encounters. He sells T-shirts that read, “Paso Robles: It Has That New Winery Smell.”

There is plenty of new energy in Paso. Tin City is one of Paso's newest and most exciting spots—a former warehouse district transformed into a hub of urban garagiste wineries where you can chat with winemakers as they work or sample their wines in hip, stylish tasting rooms. A strong sense of community exists among these new winemakers, reminiscent of the bootstrap collaboration of the generation of winemakers just before it.

“We all started by purchasing grapes and renting space,” explains Matt Trevisan of Linne Calodo, a Rhône specialist who launched his brand 20 years ago. “Now we are reinvesting; now we are planting vineyards and building wineries. I hope we turn multigenerational. That's the big test, to continue what we do.”

Two-thirds of the wineries in the area make fewer than 5,000 cases a year, and most are family-owned. You're likely to run into the winemaker when you visit a tasting room. And even as Paso has solidified its reputation for wine quality, its wineries still offer reasonable prices. “You can find world-class wines for \$45 or \$60,” points out Daou's Daniel Daou, whose Cabernets fall in that range. Meanwhile, Daou and others openly discuss their research to constantly improve their practices. Daou has been doing trials on his wine production, creating his own yeast and phenolic system. The rewards are clear. “We are attracting a higher clientele now that we are producing a higher-end Cabernet,” says Daou.

Eric Jensen of Booker, whose 2014 Oublié red was the No. 10 wine of Wine Spectator's 2017 Top 100, is obsessed with anthocyanin levels in wine, and he's working on a program to make more consistent wines. He's also building a cave and has plans to update the tasting room. "I still have that love affair with making wine, but this is about precision. I feel we owe it to the consumer," says Jensen.

There is an ongoing, complex conversation about what the "Paso style" of wine is. The region suffers from a lingering reputation for having a hot climate, and wines that are overripe and one-dimensional, but in fact, Paso makes diverse styles of wine. Top-scorers range from big, lush Grenache- and Syrah-based reds to crisp whites and firm Cabernets. Winemaker Sherman Thacher of Thacher smiles when he's asked what his focus is. "Diversity," he says. "I can't help but experiment with wines." Austin Hope agrees. "Diversity. That's the word we use for Paso. Not just the regions but the wines and styles."

Helping tell the story of Paso's diversity are the 11 new American Viticultural Areas that were approved in 2014. The region encompasses 614,000 acres, 40,000 of which are planted to wine grapes. Until the new AVAs were identified, Paso Robles had been the largest un-subdivided AVA in California. By comparison, Napa and Sonoma are both much smaller areas in terms of acreage but contain 16 and 18 sub-AVAs, respectively. These new districts have helped delineate distinct winegrowing regions: Willow Creek's lower elevation and morning fog make it ideal for Rhône varieties, while Adelaida's higher elevation and clay soils have made it a focal point for Cabernet producers.

Before these subregions were designated, the only distinction was between vineyards on the east side of Highway 101 and those on the west side, where the abundance of calcareous, limestone-rich soils and rocky hillsides benefiting from a cooling proximity to the Pacific Ocean have lured most of the best producers. There are 40 different grape varieties planted in pockets all over Paso. "The sub-AVAs are giving the region some definition," explains winemaker Jordan Fiorentini of Epoch Estate Wines.

Tourism is steady year-round. An increase in nonstop flights to the nearby San Luis Obispo airport is bringing in more visitors from around the country. A surge of new hotel projects will potentially bring the number of hotel rooms from 1,400 to 2,700. But things do slow down midweek in tasting rooms and hotels, so deals can be found. Appointments are preferred or suggested, to provide intimate tasting room experiences and attentive customer service, and you'll find most tasting rooms charge a fee. Plenty of spots are kid- and/or dog-friendly, but again, call ahead to confirm.

There are a handful of projects under way that will further change the landscape. Paso Market Walk, just north of town, is scheduled to open later this year. This 16,000-square-foot marketplace is the vision of Debby Baldwin, former co-owner of Justin Vineyards and Winery. There will be a ramen restaurant, a bakery, a gelato shop, a nursery and even a vegan cheese shop. Meanwhile, ground has broken on Sensario, a 380-acre resort that includes 80 guest casitas, a conference center, a café and a wine center. It will also include a "discovery" garden, which is described as including a maze, a waterfall and art installations.

Locals are perhaps most excited about the new downtown restaurant in the works, which will be led by Julien Asseo, former executive chef at Restaurant Guy Savoy at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. Asseo, who grew up in the region, the son of vintner Stephan Asseo, is a local boy made good.

As Paso settles into this emerging identity as a posh but cozy destination, its future shows plenty of promise and opportunity to grow in new directions. As Linne Calodo's Trevisan suggests, "We are a different big thing than we were 20 years ago. We keep reinventing ourselves over and over again."

*\*Article has been abbreviated. Full article with all food and wine recommendations can be found at [winespectator.com](http://winespectator.com)\**



*Photo by Chris Leschinsky Cris and JoAnn Cherry of Villa Creek Cellars and their dog Obi*

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For nearly 20 years, Cris and JoAnn Cherry ran both a winery and a downtown restaurant by the same name, but they closed the beloved Villa Creek eatery in 2017 to focus on wine. They recently added a biodynamic estate vineyard, Maha, to their strong portfolio of Rhône-style offerings. The tasting room features interior walls made from the property's fallen walnut trees.

\*Information has been edited to reflect updated information.