

The big red wines from Paso Robles' Westside

By Matt Kettmann in The San Francisco Chronicle

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Ever since Zinfandel started overtaking the rolling slopes around Paso Robles in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the region has been known for hearty red wines. That trend continued with the rise of Cabernet Sauvignon in the later 20th century and then skyrocketed when Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre popularized heavy-duty Rhone blends into the 21st century.

Though these kinds of wines are made in all parts of Paso Robles' sprawling wine country, which today is divided into 11 sub-appellations, the most balanced versions tend to come from those areas west of Highway 101. Vineyards in the Adelaida, Willow Creek and Templeton Gap districts can harness the heat of a Paso Robles day, but retain acidity at night due to the cooling influence of the nearby ocean.

While wine is certainly the focus of the fun in Paso's Westside, there is much joy to be had in simply looking out of the window as you drive from place to place, as this region is one of the most bucolic on the planet. Longhorn cattle, honor-system farm stands, wild turkeys and ancient oaks are just a few of the usual sights. Mix up the tastings with stops at olive oil producers such as Pasolivo or catch lunch with your wine at Niner Estate Winery along Highway 46.

Truly, there are dozens of wineries that would fit this itinerary, and stopping off at almost any of the wineries along this route will result in tastes of rich red wines. But here is a varied list of five to seek out, where both wine quality and visitor experience are fine-tuned.

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Villa Creek Cellars

A quick jaunt through Peachy Canyon brings you to Villa Creek, which started in 2001 when Cris and JoAnn Cherry decided to make wine to serve at their downtown restaurant of the same name. They bought their own estate in 2003, and the wine brand took off so much that they closed down Villa Creek restaurant in 2017. Now the Cherrys' focus is on their powerful yet elegant Rhone reds served in a small tasting room where vinyl is usually spinning.