

The Brilliant 2016s from Paso Robles

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Recent Vintages and What You Need to Know

Looking at the 2016 vintage, Paso Robles – like the rest of California – enjoyed a long, even growing season that presented few difficulties. The year started with cooler temperatures and bud break occurring slightly ahead of average. This was followed by a warm, moderate, yet dry growing season that had no significant heat spikes or weather events. Despite the lack of water, the vines and canopies were healthy and yields were close to average. Harvest kicked off in August and didn't finish up until October, with growers able to harvest at basically any point.

As to the wines, 2016 is an undeniably great vintage for Paso Robles, surpassing 2014, 2013, 2012, 2010, and 2007. In this reviewer's opinion, 2016 is the greatest vintage to date for Paso Robles, and the wines show the warm, even style of the vintage beautifully with ripe, seamless textures, terrific purity of fruit, and impeccable balance. They don't lack richness or power, yet the top wines also have incredible elegance as well as singular characters. In addition, the quality across the different varieties is high, with both thick- and thin-skinned varieties excelling in the vintage.

The greatness of the 2016 vintage is due in part to the even, picture-perfect growing season, as well as to the increased focus on vineyard management and an increase in winemaker knowledge and talent, which has never been higher.

While wine styles have shifted dramatically over the past two decades, you see a much more refined, even approach today, with winemakers happy to fine tune their wines as opposed to forcing a style. That's not to say there are not overripe/overly extracted (or early harvested/overtly green) wines out there, but the style and quality from each estate are more consistent today than it's ever been.

In contrast, the 2017 Vintage was a much more challenging vintage that saw considerable winter and spring rains (Tablas Creek reported 43 inches of rain, compared to their 25-inch average), high vigor and canopy growth, lots of mildew pressure, and a record-breaking, week-long heat spike at the end of August and early in September. The heat spell is certainly the defining feature of the vintage, with some harvesting prior to the heat and other riding it out. By and large, the Rhône varieties handled the heat well but wineries that panicked and brought in their Bordeaux varieties during the heat were rewarded with bitter tannins and hollow wines. I'll taste more extensively next year yet the barrel samples I was able to look at showed forward, rounded profiles without the density and balance of the 2016s. Where everyone was able (or should have been able) to make a good wine in 2016, 2017 is going to be much more variable. It's worth noting that the region was unaffected by the 2017 fires.

You can find additional information on previous vintages from Paso Robles in last year's "Latest Releases from Paso Robles and San Luis Obispo County" article.

The Region

Paso Robles is a large AVA that was created in 1983. At the time, it covered just 5,000 planted acres and just 17 wineries. Today, the region covers more than 40,000 acres and over 200 wineries. Up until 2014, Paso Robles was the largest non-subdivided AVA in California. All of that changed in 2014 when the AVA was subdivided into 11 different sub-AVAs: Adelaida District, Creston District, El Pomar District, Estrella District, Geneseo District, Highlands District, Willow Creek District, San Juan Creek, San Miguel District, Santa Margarita Ranch, and Templeton Gap District.

By far, the leading subregions readers should know are Adelaida, Willow Creek, and the Templeton Gap District. These three appellations cover the heart of Paso Robles which is a series of rolling limestone hillsides just to the west of the town of Paso Robles.

Looking first at the Adelaida District, this region lies in the northwestern part of the AVA and is a warmer climate

that receives roughly 25 inches of annual precipitation as well as large diurnal temperature swings. This rugged region doesn't see the marine influence of the other two sub-appellations and consists of older, calcareous soils.

The Willow Creek District lies to the south of Adelaida and is more influenced by the Pacific Ocean, with slightly cooler temperatures and more rainfall. This region consists of beautiful rolling hillsides and is primarily calcareous soils, with some loamy clay.

Lastly, the Templeton Gap District sees the most marine influence, with higher precipitation and notable fog and wind influence. Similar to the Willow Creek District, the soils consist primarily of calcareous rock and loam.

While not part of the larger Paso Robles AVA, York Mountain lies on the western edge of Paso Robles and is a cooler, wetter region that produced numerous brilliant Syrahs in this report.

Although Bordeaux and other varieties continue to gain traction, Paso Robles remains the heart of the Rhône movement in California and is a magical region for Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvèdre. The top wines tend to be blends, and there's an incredible diversity in wine styles, from ripe, powerful GSM blends to Cabernet Sauvignons that compete with the best of California, both warm- and cool-climate-like Syrahs, and Pinot-Noir like Grenache and Zinfandel releases. And while Paso Robles is a warm region, the limestone soils, as well as the cooling effect of the Pacific Ocean and Templeton Gap, help retain freshness and acidity in the wines. If you're unfamiliar with Paso Robles, now is a great time to give these wines a try.

The Tasting Notes

All of these wines were tasted during my trip through the region in August, followed by numerous follow-up tastings at my office in Colorado.

region. Made from 50% Syrah, 40% Mourvèdre, and 10% Grenache brought up all in new barrels, it offers a heavenly bouquet of blueberries, cassis, ground herbs, melted licorice, camphor, and violets. It's rich and powerful, but like all of Don's wines, it's the balance, purity, and elegance

that set it apart. A wine that just glides over the palate, with fine, fine tannins and no hard edges, it will be at its best with another year or two of bottle age and thrill for a decade or more. Hats off to Don Burns for this seriously thrilling bottle of wine! www.turtlerockvineyards.com

Ultima Tulie

ULTIMA TULIE	2016	CHARDONNAY BIEN NACIDO	SANTA MARIA VALLEY	\$38	WHITE	88
ULTIMA TULIE	2015	SY/GR	CENTRAL COAST	\$45	RED	89
ULTIMA TULIE	2016	PETITE SIRAH	PASO ROBLES	\$45	RED	86

Starting with the **2016 Chardonnay Bien Nacido**, this comes from one of the great sites in Santa Maria and spent ten months in 50% new French oak. It has classic Bien Nacido notes of caramelized orchard fruits, iodine, brioche, and honeyed minerality. This rich, medium-bodied, nicely textured effort will keep for 2-4 years.

There are two reds from this estate, both of which are enjoyable, well-made efforts. The **2015 Sy/Gr** checks in as an even split of Grenache and

Syrah brought up in 25% new barrels. It offers some leafy herbs, pepper, and meatiness as well as perfumed kirsch fruits, medium body, and a balanced, charming, delicious style.

The **2016 Petite Sirah** (100% Petite Sirah) is a bigger, richer, medium to full-bodied wine that has plenty of dark fruits and herbal notes, yet also some astringent, coarse tannins to deal with. Drink it over the coming 4-6 years. www.ultimatulie.com

Varner

VARNER	2016	FOXGLOVE CHARDONNAY	CENTRAL COAST	\$16	WHITE	86
VARNER	2017	FOXGLOVE CABERNET SAUVIGNON	PASO ROBLES	\$16	RED	87

The two value-priced wines from the Varner brothers include the **2016 Foxglove Chardonnay**, which has a bright, fresh, nicely balanced style as well as textbook orchard fruits, honeyed citrus, and brioche aromas and flavors. It would be ideal as a house white to drink over the coming couple of years.

In the same ballpark, the **2017 Foxglove Cabernet Sauvignon** is a delicious effort that gives up medium-bodied notes of red and black fruits, bay leaf, and cedar in a charming, forward, undeniably delicious package. It too is ideal for mid-week drinking over the coming couple of years. varnerwine.com

Villa Creek

VILLA CREEK	2016	ROUSSANNE JAMES BERRY VINEYARD	WILLOW CREEK DISTRICT	\$50	WHITE	91+
VILLA CREEK	2017	GRENACHE BLANC	WILLOW CREEK DISTRICT	\$32	WHITE	88
VILLA CREEK	2015	SLIDE HILL	EDNA VALLEY	\$65	RED	90+?
VILLA CREEK	2016	GARNACHA	ADELAIDA DISTRICT	\$60	RED	92
VILLA CREEK	2016	WILLOW CREEK CUVÉE	PASO ROBLES	\$50	RED	95
VILLA CREEK	2016	BÊTE NOIRE	WILLOW CREEK DISTRICT	\$70	RED	92+
VILLA CREEK	2016	HIGH ROAD JAMES BERRY VINEYARD	WILLOW CREEK DISTRICT	\$75	RED	95
VILLA CREEK	2017	AVENGER	PASO ROBLES	\$55	RED	94

I loved the **2016 Roussanne James Berry Vineyard** from the Cherrys. This beauty gives up loads of tart citrus and green apple notes, with building aromas of white flowers, brioche, and sliced almonds. It's medium-bodied and vibrant on the palate, with terrific acidity, and it's going to put on weight and richness with 6-12 months of bottle age.

Slightly deeper gold-colored, the **2017 Grenache Blanc** is slightly less successful yet certainly delicious, with easygoing notes of orchard fruits and honeyed minerality. It has solid richness and depth, and I'd give bottles six months and then drink up.

Moving to the reds, the **2015 Slide Hill** checks in as all Syrah sourced from the cooler Edna Valley. Fermented with 50% whole clusters and aged 18 months in 30% new French oak puncheons (500-liter barrels), this inky colored effort boasts outstanding notes of cracked pepper (and some white pepper), beef blood, cedar, and smoked black and blue fruits. Piercing and exotic on the nose, it's medium to full-bodied, concentrated, and tannic on the palate, and is just an exotic wine that's hard to wrap your head around. Give bottles a year or two to come together, and I suspect it will show a more classic, balanced, yet still singular style.

The **2016 Garnacha** is a no-brainer (just about year in, year out) and has loads of charm and character in its kirsch and blackberry fruits, spice, and garrigue-like aromas and flavors. It has tons of sweet fruit, a seamless texture, and is a joy to drink. This cuvée is 100% Grenache that spent 14 months in 50% new barrels.

A wine that over-delivers is the **2016 Willow Creek Cuvée**, the finest vintage

for this wine to date, hands down. A blend of 70% Grenache, 20% Syrah, and 10% Mourvèdre brought up mostly in used barrels (it was 40% destemmed), it boasts knockout notes of black raspberries, melted licorice, spiced meats, and garrigue. Deep, beautifully layered, and medium to full-bodied, it's a thrilling Grenache blend that reminds me of a top Châteauneuf du Pape!

A more Syrah-dominated blend that also includes 28% Mourvèdre and 2% Grenache Blanc, the **2016 Bête Noire** is another 2016 from Cherry that needs short-term cellaring. This deep, dense, concentrated effort gives up vibrant notes of blueberries, ground pepper, lavender, and smoked meat, with just subtle background oak showing with time in the glass. Give this vivid, vibrant, yet also sexy and textured red 2-3 years of bottle age and it's going to drink nicely through 2028.

The **2016 High Road James Berry Vineyard** is another gem in the lineup. Based on 60% Syrah, 20% Grenache, and 20% Mourvèdre, aged in 30% new French oak, it boasts full-bodied notes of red and black fruits, cured meats, toasted spices, and ample pepper, with a distinctive meatiness. Rounded, sexy yet also with terrific depth and intensity, it's already drinking brilliantly yet will keep for a decade or more.

The **2017 Avenger** is a big, ripe, full-bodied blend of 70% Syrah, 20% Mourvèdre, and 10% Grenache that saw just 30% new French oak. Blackberries, melted licorice, underbrush, and subtle olive notes all emerge from this beautifully ripe, polished, pleasure-bent Syrah that shines for its sheer balance and charm. It's great today but will keep for at least 7-8 years, although I see no need to delay gratification. www.villacreekwine.com

Vina Robles Vineyards & Winery

VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2017	SAUVIGNON BLANC JARDINE VINEYARD	PASO ROBLES	\$16	WHITE	86
VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2017	VERMENTINO HUERHUERO VINEYARD	PASO ROBLES	\$18	WHITE	89
VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2017	CHARDONNAY MISTRAL VINEYARD	MONTEREY COUNTY	\$22	WHITE	87
VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2017	ROSE HUERHUERO VINEYARD	PASO ROBLES	\$16	ROSE	86
VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2015	RED4	PASO ROBLES	\$17	RED	85
VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2015	CABERNET SAUVIGNON MOUNTAIN ROAD RESERVE	PASO ROBLES	\$54	RED	88
VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2015	PETITE SIRAH CRESTON VALLEY VINEYARD	PASO ROBLES	\$46	RED	88
VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2015	SYRAH TERRA BELLA	PASO ROBLES	\$54	RED	90
VINA ROBLES VINEYARDS & WINERY	2016	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	PASO ROBLES	\$26	RED	88

Tart citrus, peach, and some lemon notes all emerge from the **2017 Sauvignon Blanc Jardine Vineyard**, which is medium-bodied, quaffable, and a touch simple.

The **2017 Vermentino Huerhuero Vineyard** is better, with clean citrus and pineapple notes, medium body, some salty minerality, and a balanced, incredibly delicious style. It's going to shine with seafood or oysters.