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The Rhône Zone

A Handful of Renegade Winemakers Are Producing Syrahs and Viogniers and Other French Varietals That Just May Put Paso Robles on the International Map

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But from madness comes genius, as the work of renegade winemaker Stephan Asseo illustrates. Four years ago, the 42-year-old Paris native moved to Paso Robles to make Bordeaux-Rhône varietal blends after producing 16 vintages in Bordeaux. "When you leave Bordeaux to go to the New World in a wine region that is not established - that is not Napa - people think you're a little bit crazy. People asked, 'Why would you buy a regular car when you are already driving a Ferrari?'" he says. But for Asseo, the move was anything but a downgrade.

"I always wanted to blend [Bordeaux varietals] with others, such as Syrah, because I knew the results would be fantastic," he says. "But you cannot do that in Bordeaux under the appellation contrôlée. I wanted to make something new that was big, but elegant."



The result is L'Aventure Optimus - the 1999 vintage was a blend of 52% Syrah, 44% Cabernet Sauvignon and 4% Zinfandel. (The 2000 and 2001 vintages will also include Petit Verdot.) There's no question that it's unconventional, but one taste will tell you the risk paid off. Dark cherry and plum flavors with spicy oak tones that don't overpower make this one of the more intriguing Rhône blends coming out of this region.

Though Asseo's approach to blending is decidedly New World, his take on planting is rooted in tradition. He believes the region's success ultimately lies in making complex, blended wines using fruit from more densely planted vineyards - a European viticultural model that is being increasingly adopted in Northern California