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The Hope Family Vineyards' winery.

Country Fare: Paso Robles, California

SEE YOU LATER, SONOMA. WITH VINEYARDS, FARMS AND SEAFOOD GALORE, PASO ROBLES IS EMERGING AS CALIFORNIA'S NEW FOODIE PARADISE.

By Kevin West
Photographed by Simon Watson

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At nine o'clock on a spring morning, Windrose Farm, a 70-acre spread on the outskirts of Paso Robles, California, is bursting with life. Apple trees bloom as white as goose down; knee-high leeks line up in the fields; and a flock of lambs bleats loudly as farmer Bill Spencer approaches the paddock with three beer bottles in hand. "The kids are thirsty," calls out the mustachioed Windrose proprietor, holding up the bottles to show that they're filled with milk and fitted with rubber nipples.



From left: A rooster at Windrose Farm; beets at the Templeton farmers' market.

Spencer bought Windrose in 1990 with his wife, Barbara, a cellist, and today the couple farm according to biodynamic principles, an ultraorganic method that requires, among other things, fertilizing crops with manure from the farm's animals. The Spencers raise some 80 types of fruits and vegetables, offering numerous varieties of each crop: a dozen kinds of lettuce, 45 different apples, more than 100 heirloom tomatoes. Windrose's signature garlic is shipped as far away as New York, and its produce has become a staple on top menus in Los Angeles, where chefs flaunt the Windrose name as a badge

"The produce is absolutely phenomenal," says Paso Robles chef Chris Kobayashi, a loyal Windrose customer who stops by to select vegetables for Artisan, the three-year-old eatery he owns with his brother, Mike. The Kobayashis have built their restaurant around Windrose Farm's produce and other ingredients grown in surrounding San Luis Obispo County, which lies midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. "We always talked about doing a restaurant together," recalls Mike, whose previous career was managing bands (Aerosmith, Jane's Addiction) in L.A. and who oversees the business side of Artisan. "San Francisco was too expensive and saturated. I wanted to get out of the whole L.A. scene. Chris had been down here doing research, and he said, 'If we do it, I want to do it in Paso Robles.'" (A note on the nomenclature: The town is officially named El Paso de Robles, although locals call it Paso Robles—rhymes with nobles—often just Paso.)

"There are so many farms here," adds Chris, pointing out that San Luis Obispo encompasses the cornucopia of the Central Valley to the east and the seafood-rich Pacific waters to the west. "All that within 100 miles; that's a footprint for sustainability. That's what attracted me."

Plenty of other food folks evidently are of the same mind. In the past few years Paso Robles has become a destination for ambitious chefs captivated by the region's low real-estate prices, high quality of life and wealth of agricultural producers selling pristine fruits and vegetables as well as organic grains, grass-fed meats, virgin olive oil, artisanal cheese and even farm-raised abalone. Paso is also smack in the middle of the Central Coast wine-growing region, which has been acclaimed by über critic Robert Parker. Foodie tourists have followed the chefs to create a gastronomic hot spot, a kind of Sonoma County South.

It's the type of place where wood-burning ovens are de rigueur. Thomas Hill Organics, around the corner from Artisan, has one, plus its own 10-acre farm that supplies the restaurant's kitchen. So does Farmstand 46, a roadside joint opened last year by former New Yorker Tom Fundaro, who uses his to bake pizza when he's not manning the stove at his other place, Villa Creek Restaurant.

"It's a recession, so everybody has two jobs," jokes Fundaro, who worked for Eli Zabar in New York and at restaurants in Santa Fe before moving to Paso almost 10 years ago. "The concept at Farmstand was high-end deli food, with vegetables that are grown on the property."

As the original gourmet but rustic lunch spot on the wine route that runs around the west side of town, Farmstand has become a fixture on many itineraries. One day recently, the patio was shared by a pair of hipster foodies in dark denim and stylish sunglasses and a group of well-to-do baby boomers fortifying themselves between winery visits.

In Paso every season seems to bring a new establishment. Il Cortile was opened last fall by veteran L.A. chef Santos MacDonal and his wife, Carole, a reality-television producer. "A lot of people are moving from Los Angeles and San Francisco," Carole says one afternoon at the restaurant, where Santos can be seen in the open kitchen cranking out handmade pasta. "They're like-minded people coming to find a simpler way of life."

The MacDonals' story is a particularly colorful version of a familiar tale. The couple were perfectly happy in L.A. and had planned to open a restaurant there until 2006, when they honeymooned in Morro Bay, an SLO fishing village. Enchanted by the area, they made further trips and began to toy with the idea of relocating. Around that time Carole went to Hong Kong for an episode of *The Amazing Race*, where she was met by her translator, who happened to be wearing a vintage T-shirt that read paso robles.

"I sent her picture to my husband, and said, 'We're opening in Paso Robles,'" recalls Carole. Although she still commutes periodically to L.A. for work, these days her idea of power shopping is buying squash blossoms for the restaurant at the Saturday farmers' market in nearby Templeton, where she also visits Pier 46 for seafood. "We have everything we need here," Carole says, adding with a wry smile, "except shoes."

The current influx of urban sophisticates isn't the first wave of cosmopolitans to settle in Paso Robles. The region is rich in mineral springs, and soon after the railroad arrived in 1886, a Stanford White-designed luxury spa hotel was built. Guests included pianist and Polish prime minister Ignace Paderewski, who came to "take the waters" before World War I and wound up buying a huge spread where he planted grapes and bred horses. But Prohibition strangled the young wine industry, the hotel burned down in 1940, and Paso Robles became a sleepy agricultural community.

That's more or less how things remained until 30 years ago, when wine enthusiasts Justin and Deborah Baldwin drove up from L.A. and bought a piece of property with the goal of making Napa-worthy Cabernet Sauvignon that would allow them to walk away from their banking careers. "Back then fine dining in Paso Robles was having a tuna melt sandwich at Wilson's Bowling Range," Justin says over a bowl of pea puree with Parmesan foam at Deborah's Room, the seven-table restaurant at the couple's Justin Winery. When the Baldwins released their first wines in the late Eighties, adventurous drinkers began to negotiate the scenic but twisty 15-mile drive from town to the winery. "Out of desperation," as Justin puts it, they established a small guesthouse on the property, called the Just Inn, and later imported French chef Laurent Grangien to run Deborah's Room. (Grangien now owns the white-tablecloth Bistro Laurent downtown.)

Just Inn's competition arrived three years ago with the debut of Hotel Cheval downtown, which is the fanciest lodging to open locally since Paderewski's day. Owners Robert Gilson, a money manager, and his wife, Sherry, an interior designer, first came to the area more than a decade ago to buy a horse ranch as a weekend escape from their home in Montecito.

"The downtown was adorable," recalls Sherry one afternoon on the terrace of the Hotel Cheval. "We thought there was a real place for something that would appeal to other people from outside of the area."

The couple bought a number of faded properties to restore, as well as an empty lot just off the town's graciously proportioned main square to build Hotel Cheval, which combines such amenities as Wi-Fi and luxury bedding with homey touches like two outdoor fireplaces tended by a staffer whose sole job is to stoke the fire.

"I didn't think it was a big risk at all," says Robert, when asked why he thought the market could support \$400-a-night rooms. "The wine movement was afoot, and for the people who enjoy a big, dialed-up wine and food experience, where were they supposed to stay?"

He notes that Parker's embrace of Paso Robles wines has been hugely important, and that the critic's "third-party endorsement" helped spread the word to high-end clients, like a business titan who flew in on his Gulfstream V for a weekend of tasting. Yet despite the city slickers, Robert says he recently saw a cowboy ride up to the old saloon downtown, where the hitching posts are not just for show.

Most of today's farmers are as likely to ride to town in Priuses. Though farming has been a principal part of the SLO economy since the Mennonites—still large landholders in the area—arrived a little more than a century ago, local beef rancher Laird Foshay is typical of the new-wave “ag hero.” In the Nineties he was living in Silicon Valley, building the financial reporting business Investools, which he and his partners sold in 1999 for a hefty sum. “My wife and I had spent our whole married life shopping for real estate, half as a fantasy,” says Foshay, who wears a cowboy hat as he drives around his 1,500-acre ranch near Justin Winery. “We came here and fell in love.”

Foshay threw himself into the country life, planting vineyards and encouraging his children to join 4-H. With financial resources most farmers could only dream about, he bought a herd of Angus cattle; now he sells his grass-finished beef locally and online under the Adelaida Springs Ranch label.

Of course, many such Green Acres tales involve shaky starts. Ten years ago, Joeli Yaguda was vice president of marketing for a dot-com when she and her husband decided to take charge of a 6,000-tree olive orchard his mother had planted as a retirement project. To say Yaguda lacked experience is an understatement. “I was a theater major,” says Yaguda, who enrolled in olive oil-making classes and perfected her technique through trial and quite a bit of error. After one early harvest, a sample of her oil made it to a Bay Area food professional whose response, Yaguda reports, was, “I hope they don't quit their day jobs.” Today, Pasolivo oil is used at the always packed Osteria Mozza in L.A., and was recently ranked in the top 10 out of 1,000 in a German competition. “We can't get enough of her olio nuovo,” says Osteria Mozza executive chef Matt Molina, who also frequently sources produce from Windrose Farm. “They grow what they're passionate about,” he says of the Spencers. “They're not going to grow something just for the money.”

The local wine world, too, has upped its game. For the past decade, Austin Hope, who grew up in the business in Paso, has been focused on making intense Rhône-style wines at his eponymous winery, which features the most strikingly contemporary tasting room in the region. Other winemakers, meanwhile, are embracing the notion of terroir, or site-specific, wines as a path away from the big, powerful “fruit bombs” that first brought the region to Parker's attention. Long-standing producers like Tablas Creek—developed in partnership with the Perrin family from France's Châteauneuf-du-Pape region—have established the area's potential for Rhône varietals, while younger winemakers such as Cris and JoAnn Cherry of Villa Creek Cellars are experimenting with old-world styles like Spanish Tempranillo.



And at nearby L'Aventure Winery, Stephan Asseo, a true old-world winemaker who moved from Bordeaux a decade ago, is producing sought-after, idiosyncratic wines that blend Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Asseo admits that he would never be allowed to do such things in France, where not only tradition but also law dictates which grapes may be used in each region. He calls L'Aventure wines “my crazy Paso blends.”

“We are a new growing region with a lot of young, experimental winemakers,” says Ali Rush Carscaden, who worked as a sommelier at local wineries before opening her wine shop, 15 Degrees C, in Templeton. “With so much competition, you have to find your niche.”

Indeed, the refrain one hears from old-timers—which is to say, anyone who has been around Paso for a decade—is how many vineyards there are today compared with the “good old days.” Back at Windrose, Bill Spencer, a Pasadena native, recounts that he arrived in Paso in 1962, when his father, a surgeon, purchased a horse ranch. “When Bill moved here, there were three wineries,” interjects Barbara. “Now there are probably 300.” (Not quite yet—the county has more like 230.) She remembers a moment a few years ago when she was driving into town and noticed a rush of BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes streaming among vineyards. “I thought, The plain country life is over,” Barbara says, cleaning an armful of freshly dug garlic for Chris Kobayashi. “But the good side of the wine industry and the tourists is that we have really good restaurants now. And without them I couldn't grow what I want to grow.”