

# Santa Barbara News Press

## Winemaking as an adventure in Paso Robles

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It's always great when another Frenchman comes to the Central Coast and puts down (vineyard) roots here. It's an affirmation of what locals knew all along: that this is one of the most perfect areas in the world for grape growing. No, I'm not talking about the Perrin Brothers' Tablas Creek Vineyard, which I wrote about last time. This Frenchman is not nearly as well known, though *The Wine Spectator* recently called him one of "the young Turks of Paso Robles."

Stephan Asseo is his name and he left a comfortable winemaking situation in Bordeaux to explore the New World. He searched up and down California for a vineyard site until he found what thought was a very promising site, on the west side of Paso Robles, not coincidentally, near where the Perrin Brothers planted. The 35-acre vineyard that Asseo planted, to syrah, mourvedre, cabernet and petite verdot, is called Stephan Ridge, while the winery is titled L'Aventure ("the adventure"). At 42, he already has two decades of winemaking experience and, frankly, it shows up in the bottle, raising the standards for winemaking in Paso Robles. The wines are pricey, with L'Aventure in the \$28 to \$36 range and the Stephan Ridge label at \$20, but they are worth it. Some thoughts on the wines:

**L'Aventure Rose 2001:** Asseo shrugs his shoulders when asked about his pink wine, as if to apologize that it's not serious stuff, but it's a fine quaffer on a warm afternoon. A blend, primarily cabernet, it has a neat strawberry and cream nose. The flavors are all bright strawberry but it has good palate grip, finishing slightly on the sweet side.

**Stephan Ridge Viognier 2000:** Nicely perfumed viognier with a peach-and-apricot-skin aromatics that aren't over the top. The typical flavors are atypically well delineated, showing off the sweet, ripe fruit. It's a very succulent and seductive wine that hits all the marks of what an elegant viognier should be. The balance of fruit, body and acidity really makes this wine work well with food.

**L'Aventure Chardonnay 2000:** Again, another atypical wine, 100 percent fermented in new French oak but with no malolactic (secondary) fermentation! That's nearly heresy on the Central Coast, but Asseo knows what he's doing because this is a terrific Burgundian style chard. A flinty, mineral nose also includes some caramel and vanilla aromatics. On the palate, the lemon-lime and mineral flavors are simply refreshing, as Asseo lets the vineyard "terror" speak for itself without manipulation. And while it's bright, it's also weighty with big palate impact. The oak caresses the fruit without seeming overpowering and the flavors persist on the long, lemony finish. Again, the acidity, in balance with the other elements, makes this wine especially food friendly.

**L'Aventure Zinfandel 2000:** Plenty of oak and plenty of jammy, whammy juicy fruit in this zin from the git-go. Power-packed and upfront, in-your-face flavors, it has the alcohol to go with it but also the requisite briary/brambly overtones too. In the end, it's rich and well-endowed juice, bursting with flavor but not overwhelming like some high-octane zins. It's a well-balanced zin that wears a tuxedo instead of blue jeans.

**L'Aventure Optimus 2000:** This would be Asseo's blending masterpiece and it comes pretty close to achieving that description. A nearly equal blend of cabernet and syrah, with a pinch of zin and petite verdot mixed in, Optimus

is the proprietary name for the best wine that Asseo can make. It has a great jammy, berryish nose, but it's serious, not just fruit-forward, flash-in-the-pan stuff. Dark berry and cassis flavors along with damson plums are buffered by a pleasant "terror" driven chalkiness and vanilla. The 100-percent new French oak is well integrated, and the wine shows terrific intensity as well as purity on the sweet finish. The oak both supports the fruit but complexes it at the same time, making this a very complete wine. You can drink it now - it's that supple - but it will be even better 10 years from now.

**Stephan Ridge Red 2000:** This is the little brother of Optimus, at about half the price. You get the same wine growing expertise and the same blending talents, but this juice didn't make the cut for the top blend. About an equal blend of syrah and cabernet, it was aged in 30-percent new French oak for 13 months and then (as with all L'Aventure/Stephan Ridge reds) bottled without any fining or filtration. It has that deep, dark berry nose that indicates juicy, jammy fruit is just ahead. In the mouth, dark berry and sour cherry fruit combined with the oak aging for a textural pop on mid-palate. While the wine just oozes plenty of depth and length without being heavy or ponderous. Supple and drinkable right now, this is obviously Asseo's idea of what a good red wine should taste like, regardless of varietal.