

Wine Spectator



California's New Frontier

Exciting Wines, From Santa Barbara to Monterey

Paso Robles

An established region seeks a new identity built on Rhône varieties

By Daniel Sogg

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Nearby, Bordeaux expatriate Stephan Asseo, 46, has settled on a combination of Rhône and Bordeaux grapes from his Stephan Vineyards. The winemaker arrived in 1998, lured, like the Perrin brothers, by the limestone-riddled soils and relatively modest land prices. He also welcomed freedom from French appellation rules that dictact grape varieties and production methods. Asseo planned to plant half Cabernet Sauvignon and most of the balance to Rhône varieties. Subsequent experience tweaked the percentages - Syrah is the primary grape, followed by Cabernet, Petit Verdot, Grenache and Mourvèdre. There are 56 acres total, divided into 25 blocks.

Asseo has nine bottlings, of which eight are red, with prices ranging from \$20 to \$75. His best wines, the L'Aventure Estate Syrah and L'Aventure Estate Cuvée, a blend of Cabernet, Syrah and Petit Verdot, are unusually bold and concentrated, and consistently rank among the best in Paso Robles. The 2001 L'Aventure Estate Cuvée scored 93 points. But success here doesn't come easily. To achieve the desired concentration, Asseo says it's necessary to limit yields to no more than 2 tons per acre.

Asseo, unshaven and wind-burned, negotiates the steep slopes in a mud-splattered four-wheel drive vehicle he calls "the mule" - more or less a stripped down golf cart without the stability. He frowns at the number of pink ribbons (marking dead vines) scattered throughout a block of year-old Syrah. "F-ing gophers," he says, with a strong French accent that makes it come out "go-fare." The redonts gnawed through the vines, killing nearly 40 percent of them, so Asseo now pays a bounty on them. But today he feels lucky; storms pummeled much of the Central Coast the night before, downing trees and power lines, but missing his property. After eight years, Asseo takes it in stride. He practically qualifies as part of the Paso Robles old guard.

	SCORE	PRICE
STEPHAN L'Aventure Estate Cuvée Paso Robles 2003	91	\$80
STEPHAN Syrah Paso Robles L'Aventure Estate 2003	90	\$65
STEPHAN L'Aventure Optimus Paso Robles 2003	88	\$50

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