

THE NEW NEW NAPA

PASO ROBLES
HAS THE WINE
WORLD ABUZZ.
JAY MCINERNEY
FINDS THE PRAISE
WELL-EARNED



EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Above: Paso Robles may be America's most beautiful and unspoiled wine country.

Left: Stephan Asseo produces one of the region's greatest red wines.

Stephan Asseo had never heard of Paso Robles when he set out in 1996 for the New World. After 20 years in Bordeaux's Entre-Deux-Mers region, Asseo was frustrated with the restrictions of the French appellation contrôlée system, and, to a lesser extent, the weather. His quest for a viticultural Eden wound through South Africa, Chile, Napa and Sonoma. "While I am visiting Santa Barbara," the ruddy, boyish, vigneron says, pausing to light the stub of his cigar on a blowtorch, "I keep hearing about Paso Robles." Presumably he heard this through a translator, since he spoke no English at the time. Even now, Asseo's English sticks strictly to the present tense, which suits his manic demeanor, and relies heavily on profanity, which he uses to express enthusiasm.

"I drive north and I fall in love right away," he says. Standing in the middle of his rolling, hilly vineyard, L'Aventure, watching the condors circle overhead and the quail scuttling through the vines, it's not hard to understand this sentiment. He clearly loves this land he's chosen, quite a bit of which is lodged under his fingernails.

Paso Robles is one of the most dramatic and unspoiled landscapes I've encountered in 15 years of writing about wine, particularly in the spring, when the steep hillsides are green from the winter precipitation and sprinkled with purple lupine and yellow buttercups. Justin Baldwin, who arrived nearly two decades before Asseo, says that the sleepy, prelapsarian vibe reminds him of Napa in the 1950s and '60s. Driving along the winding, dusty back roads past Mennonite homesteads shaded by stands of towering live oaks, grazing cattle and flocks of wild turkey, it's easy to feel that you have stumbled on one of the last undiscovered corners of the Golden State. The

best of its wines have a special beauty of their own.

Beauty aside, Asseo's geological instincts proved to be good; research showed that the soil composition on the eastern side of Paso Robles was incredibly complex and similar to Bordeaux, with lots of limestone, and the climate, with its 50-degree daytime temperature swings, was pretty close to ideal for growing grapes with complex flavors. The Templeton Gap is a gash through the high coastal ridge which funnels ocean winds far into the east side of Paso Robles, bringing cool oceanic influence and moisture into areas that would otherwise be sheltered.

Zinfandel was the among the first grapes planted here early in the 20th century; the old vines eventually drew zin master Larry Turley of Napa's Turley Wine Cellars to establish a winery here, where he joined zin specialists Dusi, Eberle and Peachy Canyon. In the '60s and '70s, Dr. Stanley Hoffman planted some of the first cabernet, pinot and chardonnay with the encouragement and guidance of the great André Tchelistcheff, one of the pioneers of Napa Valley's wine industry.

In the early 1980s, recovering bankers Justin and Deborah Baldwin focused on cabernet and chardonnay after they bought acreage from Mennonite farmers right across the ridge from the Hearst Castle. The glamorous couple met when he applied for a mortgage. She turned him down, but eventually agreed to go on a date. Justin Smith started out as a hobbyist, commuting from L.A., and finally moved to Paso Robles in 1991 to manage their growing estate — now one of the biggest in the region, with a production of 40,000 cases and 12,000 members in its Wine Society, some of whom are always hanging around the new winery building. Justin's Isoceles cabernet sauvignon has become a benchmark for the region, nailing big scores from the critics since the '90s. It's a rich, concentrated wine, but it has a bright acidity that distinguishes it from the big Napa Valley cult cabernets.



FROM THE SOMMELIER

TOP 6 WINES OF THE REGION

JUSTIN, ISOSCELES CABERNET BLEND

This fruit-forward cab has dark berries balanced with gripping tannins. The notes of mocha and vanilla add depth and complexity. *Pair with short ribs, hard cheeses*

TABLAS CREEK, ESPRIT DE BEUCASTEL BLANC, RHÔNE WHITE BLEND

Lemon and white pepper highlight this wine. The soft, tropical fruit balances the bright citrus flavors, and there is a slightly honeyed finish. *Pair with shellfish, grilled vegetables, softly spiced Asian dishes*

ETNYRE, SYRAH

Raspberries and blackberries give way to leather and smoke in this full-bodied syrah. The finish of both white and black pepper spice allows it to pair well with most grilled meat dishes. The olive and leather notes complement and add to the soft gaminess of lamb. *Pair with lamb, grilled beef*

L'AVENTURE, OPTIMUS

Herbs and black currants fill the nose, and cranberry, pomegranate and eucalyptus add body to the palate. *Pair with duck*

EBERLE, VIOGNIER

This Viognier has a floral nose with honeysuckle and white flowers. The palate is rich with lychee and apricot, and it finishes with a clean hint of citrus zest. This is a surprisingly fuller-bodied wine. *Pair with halibut, white-sauce pasta dishes*

THACHER, ZINFANDEL

With a nose of jammy raspberries and dark cherries, this is a full-bodied wine with extra notes of vanilla, cinnamon and allspice. It works very well as an after-dinner wine when port is too strong. *Pair with roasted meats, chocolate desserts*

NICOLE ORTEGA

THE RITZ-CARLTON, HALF MOON BAY

One of the most significant events in the development of Paso Robles was the arrival of the Perrin Family, of Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which just happens to be my favorite Southern Rhône domain. After scouting the globe for a suitable spot with a Mediterranean climate and similar soils to their native region, they found a hilly site on the western side of Paso Robles and, in partnership with their American importer, Robert Haas, began planting vines from France, producing their first vintage of Tablas Creek in 1997. Their excellent red and white Esprit de Beaucastel wines mimic the blend of the great Châteauneuf-du-Pape varietals (mourvèdre, grenache, syrah and counoise, in the case of the red), but they seem more accessible and less earthy, possibly because of the youth of the vines. For whatever reason, they have a definite California accent, though they would never be mistaken for chardonnays or cabernets. At about the same time Tablas Creek went online, winemakers Justin Smith and Matt Trevisan, of Linne Calodo, were starting to make some great wines with Rhône varietals which they also blended with old-vine zinfandel, the first grape planted in the area.

Faced with the choice of the Rhône model or the Bordeaux model, intrepid interloper Stephan Asseo chose both. He now produces a Châteauneuf-style blend, Côte-à-Côte, which he calls “my prostitute wine,” presumably because of its floozy sex appeal, as well as a straight cabernet sauvignon, which he frankly calls “a marketing concession.” Cabernet remains California’s most recognizable varietal, and he feels he needs one in the portfolio. But he is most proud of the Estate Cuvée, his most iconoclastic wine, a blend of cabernet, syrah and petit verdot, which he seems to feel best represents his terroir and his philosophy.

Outside of Australia, cab and syrah, like crows and owls, are rarely seen together, although there is a sub-rosa historical precedent: In the 18th century, weak vintages of Bordeaux were sometimes illegally beefed up with syrah from the Northern Rhône. Asseo thinks this combination is “pure Paso” and views the blend as his signature wine.

Critics seem to agree. Robert Parker has given the last three vintages scores of 97 and 98 points, calling the '06 “a thrilling, nearly perfect effort.” Other wineries including cab specialists Justin are also producing cab-syrah blends.

But Paso Robles is not so easily pigeonholed as a visiting wine writer might wish, and this may delay recognition of the region. Napa is inextricably identified with cabernet, while “Sideways” has made Santa Ynez, an hour south of Paso, almost synonymous with pinot noir. When I comment on the lack of pinot in Paso Robles, Asseo tells me about his friend and neighbor Marc Goldberg, of Windward Vineyard, who makes “a great pinot, very Burgundian, you must visit him. I give you his number.”

By the time I leave L'Aventure it's after 6 p.m. and the Windward tasting room is closed, but I take a chance and bang on the door of the house beside it. The diminutive, goateed guy who eventually opens the door amidst a pack of barking dogs has all the signs of someone awakened from a nap and seems none too pleased about it, but he warms up when I tell him Stephan sent me and leads me over to his tasting room. Goldberg pours me a glass of his '05 Windward Pinot Noir, and when I express enthusiasm he breaks out his '05 Gold Barrel Select, which has the delicate complexity and earthy undertones of a fine Chambolle-Musigny, although it finishes a little sweeter than a classic Burgundy, as do most New World pinots.

Like many of the region's finest, including Linne Calodo and Saxum, Windward Canyon's is a small-production (2,000 cases) wine that is tough to find outside the region, although many of the vineyards, including L'Aventure, sell much of their production via mailing list. The best, and most enjoyable, way to learn about the area's wines, and to acquire them, is to visit. If you do, bring a cigar for Stephan.

