

Forbes

The Next Napa

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Haven't heard of Paso Robles yet? Fine. That's the way wine lovers hope to keep it. By Alan Farnham

THERE'S LOTS TO LIKE ABOUT THE NAPA VALLEY. SO MUCH, IN FACT, THAT Napa now ranks among the biggest tourist draws in California, ahead of Yosemite. Five million tourists a year beat a pathway to its door. But not surprisingly, that door is looking scuffed. Tour buses now snake their way through what, 15 years ago, was Eden. Traffic is hellish on the weekends; anybody wanting to make a left-hand turn off Highway 29, the valley's main artery, might just as well try making same-day reservations at the French Laundry.

At more than one winery, glitz has muscled aside charm. After Francis Ford Coppola bought Inglenook, he added props from his movies—vampire costumes from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a Tucker automobile from *Tucker*, a gunboat from *Apocalypse Now*. The result is what you might call Hollywood and Vines.

Miss the quaint old Napa? The little vineyard whose owner might himself be your host at an inn? Look south, down the coast. Midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles lies Paso Robles, with most of the winemaking potential of Napa but almost none of the traffic jams. Paso's 60 vineyards attract just a million tourists a year.

For most of Paso Robles' history, its grapes went straight into jug wine or undistinguished blends. Then, in the 1980s, a new breed of vintner took stock of soil and climate, and decided Paso



(as the locals call it) could do better. Two years ago Robert Parker Jr., the famed wine critic—and a man not noted for rhapsodic endorsements—sampled the wines of Stephan Vineyards, a Paso newcomer. Parker pronounced its 1999 L'Aventure vintage "sensational," "profound," "reference points for complexity and quality" and gave it a 92 rating, comparable to far pricier Mouton Rothschild or Cheval Blanc.

Owner Stephan Asseo, a Frenchman with a puckish, aw-shucks demeanor, shrugs Gallically at all the praise. His wines, he says, owe everything to the *terroir*—the substrate of limestone and clay similar to what one would find in the Rhône valley. Grapes have a hard time growing here, and that is paradoxically good: Less fruit means greater intensity of flavor. Whereas an acre in Napa might yield 6 to 8 tons, an acre here yields 2.5.

"It's quality of fruit that's key," says Asseo, "[not] the equipment or the technology." With a sweep of a callused hand he takes in the steep hillsides of his vineyards. "You can inject millions, but never can you change the *terroir*." After leaving his family's winery in France, Asseo searched the world for a place to start a vineyard of his own—Australia, South Africa, Spain, Napa, Sonoma and Santa Barbara. He chose Paso.



Photo: A man and his *terroir*: transplanted Frenchman Stephan Asseo.



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