

# The Women of Paso Robles

by Allison Levine

**P**aso Robles is growing exponentially these days. Although commercial winemaking in the area began in the late 1870s, the number of bonded wineries in Paso Robles Wine Country has more than tripled since 2000, from 50 to more than 180. Still considered by many to be the Wild West of the California wine industry, Paso Robles, like other wine regions, has been dominated by male winemakers, vineyard managers and winery owners—until the mid-1990s, that is.

Today, the region boasts nine female winemakers and seven female assistant winemakers, as well as innumerable women working in the cellars. There are also 30 female winery owners/co-owners, as well as many other passionate, innovative and talented women working in other facets of the wine and hospitality industries.

Here's the first of our multi-part series taking a look at these amazing, driven women who are a significant part of what makes Paso Robles so special.

Innovative and driven, **Signe Zoller**, President/Winemaker, Zoller Winestyling was one of the first women winemakers in Paso and one of the most influential. With a M.A. from UC Davis, Signe began as a cellar rat at Kendall Jackson, where she was “one of the boys.” Signe arrived in Paso Robles in 1994, when there were only 40 wineries in the region, spending the next eleven years as winemaker at Meridian. Since 2006, Signe has been consulting with individual and small businesses and attempts to take the mystery out of wine by walking her clients through the entire process of making wine.

[www.zollerwinestyling.com](http://www.zollerwinestyling.com)



Signe Zoller.

PHOTO: ALLISON LEVINE



Amy Jean Butler

PHOTO: ALLISON LEVINE

Consulting on the side with Signe at Zoller Winestyling, **Amy Jean Butler** is winemaker at Edward Sellers and proprietor of Rancho Cellars. Graduated from UC Davis in 1997, Amy spent a year in Sonoma and five in Napa before discovering Paso Robles seven years ago. Finding a Davis degree and Napa experience scarcely beneficial in Paso, she started as a fork lift operator and then a harvest assistant. She joined Edward Sellers in 2004 and just completed her sixth vintage. In 2008 she started her own label, Rancho Cellars, where she will produce 400 cases of Rhône varietal wines. She quips, “Most male winemakers don’t consider it a huge accomplishment to get through a bottling without crying . . . but I do.”

[www.edwardsellers.com](http://www.edwardsellers.com)

As a high school teacher on the East Coast, **Amanda Cramer** dreamed about being a winemaker. After returning to school at UC Davis, Amanda spent time at Far Niente and Chimney Rock and was one of the first three women hired to work at D’Arenberg in Australia; she also worked at Casa Lapostolle in Chile. She spent two years at Paradigm as assistant winemaker under Heidi Barrett, but in Napa she saw her options to be limited: either continue an assistant winemaker or leave the area. In 2004, Amanda moved to Paso and joined Niner Wine Estates, where, as winemaker, she helped design the new state-of-the-art winery. Today, Amanda feels, there’s a cachet to being a female winemaker, and she credits Signe Zoller and Heidi Barrett with paving the way.

[www.ninerwine.com](http://www.ninerwine.com)

PHOTO: ALLISON LEVINE



Lisa Pretty

**Chrissy Wittman**, winemaker at Wild Horse Winery & Vineyards, spent family vacations in Paso Robles when it was a quarter the size it is today. After graduating from Cal Poly, Chrissy took a job with Meridian. She joined Wild Horse in 2007, where her goal is to help build Paso’s reputation in the wine world. The challenges of making wine and the people involved are what motivate Chrissy. She relishes every opportunity to promote women in the industry.

[www.wildhorsewinery.com](http://www.wildhorsewinery.com)



Chrissy Wittman

PHOTO COURTESY OF WILD HORSE WINERY

**Tiffinee Vierra** moved to Paso after graduating from Cal Poly in 2001 to work at Edna Valley Vineyard as a lab technician. After a stint as assistant winemaker at Four Vines Winery, Tiffinee joined Pam and Ray Derby’s Derby Wine Estates in 2005. As winemaker and GM, Tiffinee is responsible for styling the wine and loves the creative freedom. “Much of my success is based upon the proof that I am the best person for the job—and if I am not, then I find someone who is. Derby has always been a group effort, and as long as I am involved, it will continue to be.”

[www.derbywineestates.com](http://www.derbywineestates.com)

Self-taught **Lisa Pretty**, President and winemaker, Pretty Smith Vineyards and Winery, is a one-woman force to be reckoned with. Owner, vineyard manager and winemaker, she also runs the tasting room, website and winery-direct sales. Bitten by the wine bug after working in high tech and international business, she began working her way down the California coast with the vision of owning a vineyard. When Lisa arrived ten years ago, she was asked

PHOTO: ALLISON LEVINE



Amanda Cramer

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regularly if her dad gave her the job, and sales guys would come in and ask to meet with her husband. Today, Lisa is a one-woman show—the only winery owner, vineyard owner and winemaker in the area.

[www.prettysmith.com](http://www.prettysmith.com)

**Deborah Baldwin** and husband Justin, co-proprietors of Justin Vineyards and Winery, are a successful partnership story. Investment bankers who decided they wanted to make world-class Bordeaux-style wines, they bought their property in 1981 and were the ninth winery in the area; their restaurant, Debbie's Room, and hotel, JustInn, followed. Debbie has always worked in a "boys' world" and feels she has always had to work harder and shout louder to be heard. Debbie has served on Wine Institute's Central Coast Winery Board and was elected to the Winery Board of Directors of the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance in 2003, where she helped create the annual Road Tour. Deborah and Justin have been named Paso Robles Wine Industry "Persons of the Year."

[www.justinwine.com](http://www.justinwine.com)

**Jennifer Hoage**, co-proprietor of Terry Hoage Vineyards, is also in partnership with her husband, Terry. With a background in public relations, Jennifer opened an interior design business in Phoenix. While driving from Los Angeles to Monterrey, the couple fell in love with Paso and moved there in 2000 to raise their children. The idea was to plant and sell grapes; they bought property with five acres planted and in

2002 produced their first vintage. Today, Jennifer and Terry are a team and share all elements of running a winery.

[www.terryhoagevineyards.com](http://www.terryhoagevineyards.com)



Susan "SAM" Mahler

PHOTO COURTESY OF FOURVINES

Born in the Midwest and the youngest of five, **Susan "SAM" Mahler**, "Queen E.O.," Four Vines, wanted to be a pilot; after school, she moved to Encinitas, California, but spent her time fueling planes. So she departed for Berkeley, where she attended graduate school; it was there that Sam met her business partner, Chris Tietje. They began making wine in Paso in 1996, while still living in Northern California. When they saw the potential that Paso offered and realized that they could be players in the wine business, they moved there permanently. "Paso is about *why* you are doing what you are doing," Sam says; "it's about the community and helping each other."

[www.fourvines.com](http://www.fourvines.com)

*The next part of this series will take a look at women who grew up on farms in Paso and were the first generation in their families to make wine. ■■*



Jennifer Hoage

PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRY HOAGE VINEYARDS

PHOTO: ALLISON LEVINE