



# PASO ROBLES

## & THE ART OF THE BLEND

The region's quirky microclimates and an overall improvement in all-important Cabernet Sauvignon have launched Paso wines into the stratosphere.

BY STEVE HEIMOFF

Paso Robles is red wine country, and while the winemakers here turn out splendid Syrahs, Cabernet Sauvignons and Petite Sirahs, it is the blends that are Paso Robles' emerging stars.

Paso produces three sorts of blends: standard Bordeaux (or Meritage), Rhône-style (Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache, and sometimes Counoise), and what the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance calls "unique Paso blends" that include everything from Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon to Zinfandel, Petite Sirah and Tempranillo.

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Mike Sinor, winemaker at Ancient Peaks (above), characterizes Paso as "the wild wild west," not bound by conformity; right, Austin Hope, owner and winemaker at Treana.



a few hundred feet in elevation can result in different climate zones.



You'll find blended wines throughout California, but Paso Robles is the only major region that's chosen to specialize in them. Other appellations are defined by single varieties (Napa Valley = Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Rita Hills = Pinot Noir, Sierra Foothills = Zinfandel, etc.). In Paso, they march to a different beat.

### The wild wild west

"These proprietary blends represent a real opportunity for Paso Robles to think outside the square," says Chris Cameron, the winemaker at JanKris, whose 2007 Ben Hogan Tribute Series Red Wine (90 points, \$22) is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah.

It's hard to pinpoint why single red varieties don't perform as well as blends in Paso. Cabernet Sauvignon, by itself, more often than not is linear. (There are obvious exceptions, such as Justin's Reserve.) But add some Cab to a blend, and it can pop the wine alive. Austin Hope, the owner of Treana, whose 2006 Red Wine (92 points, \$50) is a Cabernet-Syrah blend, explains this phenomenon: "Cabernet by itself is front-loaded, without midpalate, but Syrah gives it nice weight. Together, they make a better wine."

At Tablas Creek, they take a traditional southern Rhône approach, blending three or four varieties together. "Why do we blend in a world where varieties reign supreme?" General Manager Jason Haas asks rhetorically. "Because blends are better than component pieces." Cerro Prieto's owner/winemaker, Larry Stanton, puts the case this way: "Our Syrah was magnificent, and so was the Cab. But when we put them together, it was like 1+1=6."

### A diversity of terroirs

Paso Robles, at 666,618 acres, is California's fifth-largest American Viticultural Area (AVA), and the biggest within a single county (San Luis Obispo). For years, outsiders

viewed Paso Robles as a uniformly hot place, but its temperatures actually range from moderately warm in the west and south to outright hot in the north and east. A huge diurnal swing at night results in temperatures that can be in the 40s toward dawn, even in high summer.

But this is an oversimplification. In the hilly west, which is set among the southernmost outcrops of the Santa Lucia Mountains, a difference of

"Up on top of our vineyard, it can be 18–20 degrees warmer at night than down below, which is why we grow Cabernet and Syrah up there, and Pinot Noir below," explains Stanton, at Cerro Prieto. His 2006 Paso Bordo (92 points, \$36) is 85% Cab and 15% Syrah. When Stanton originally planted the vineyard, he put Cabernet at the bottom "because we didn't know then that it's a cold-air sink. The Cab never had a chance to ripen."

This climate and soil spectrum offers vintners an artist's palette of ingredients to work with. "Paso Robles has a much greater diversity of terroir than, say, Napa Valley, and a lot more varieties to work with, so with all these components, we can make some really interesting wines," says James Hendon, whose Pear Valley 2006 Distraction (91 points, \$43) is a Cab-based Bordeaux blend. Hope, at Treana, brings this same approach to his red wine. "We can get ripe Syrah from the east and cooler, Côte-Rôtie [style Syrah] from the west, and with Cabernet the same way: riper from the east, and a small amount of that cooler, greener element from the west." Haas sums up how this diversity of terroirs benefits local *blendistas*. "Paso is too big to generalize about it. There's room for people to do anything they can imagine."

### High rent, high alcohol

Common sense suggests that Paso Robles should be split up into smaller AVAs. The region itself tried to do just that, last spring, and failed, when the federal Tax and Trade Bureau, after lengthy consideration, rebuffed permits for so-called "nested" AVAs.

Whether Paso Robles someday divides into 12, or 15, or whatever the number of new appellations will be, remains to be seen. But one thing is

predictable: there will be high-rent districts, and one of them will be Willow Creek, in the western elevations of the Santa Lucias, and a beneficiary of the Templeton Gap maritime influence. Here are the vineyards of Saxum, L'Aventure, Cerro Prieto, Linne Calodo, Jack Creek and Villa Creek, among others. (Here, too, is Zinfandel specialist Turley.) All produce red wines with a recognizable signature: lush and decadent in fruit, yet controlled and balanced. Alcohol levels can be high, but unless you're a zealot about such things, that's simply a fact of life. "When you see Willow Creek on a label," says Saxum's founder and winemaker, Justin Smith, "you'll have a pretty good idea what it is."

When it comes to the topic of high alcohol, no wines from Paso Robles stimulate debate more than Saxum's. They routinely break the 16% barrier. Saxum's 2006 Bone Rock (94 points, \$75), a blend of Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache, clocks in at 16.7%. Smith makes no apologies. "We have chosen to show respect for [the wine] and let it be what it is," he says, adding that high alcohol "is just something you have to deal with." Some vintners, such as Hendon at Pear Valley, are trying to reduce alcohol naturally, rather than artificially through the use of centrifuges or adding water. "I'm working to get the alcohols back down—trying to get the grapes ripe without getting too high sugar," he says,



Far left: Steve Peck, winemaker at J. Lohr, uses a new sorting system to ensure the quality of his Cabs; left, James Hendon, winemaker at Pear Valley Vineyards, crafts primarily varietal wines, but also makes a Bordeaux blend called Distraction.

the other half were “unique Paso blends,” but tellingly, most of them contained Cabernet Sauvignon. This suggests how much Paso Cabernet Sauvignon is improving.

concerning Distraction’s 15.5% alcohol reading.

Hope believes he’ll be able to reduce the alcohol level on his Treana Reds by at least 1%. The key is getting the tannins ripe before the grape sugar soars. “It’s a fine line,” Hope says. “We’re just at the tip of our learning curve.”

### The Cabernet factor

For some time, Paso Cabernet didn’t fare well. The wines were fruity, but were often sugary sweet and jammy. Harsh, dry tannins could be a problem, and so could high alcohol. (There are still too many Paso wines that suffer from these defects.) There came a point when I didn’t think Paso Robles could figure Cabernet out.

In June, I asked the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance to set me up with a blind tasting of more than 100 of their blended wines. When all was tasted and scored, I discovered that more than half of the highest scoring (90 points or higher) wines were Bordeaux blends. Most of

Indeed, Paso Robles growers and vintners there have been tackling Cab with renewed vigor. The improvements have been due both to viticultural and winemaking practices. Some vintners have reoriented their vine rows to north-south, which allows them to throw a heavier canopy on the western side, to shelter the fruit from the afternoon sun. Growers are paying more attention to crop levels and irrigation management. Steve Peck, at J. Lohr, gives credit for the success of his Cuvée series of Bordeaux blends to the winery’s new Mistral® sorting system, which prevents raisins, stems and shot berries from reaching the fermenter. “That’s particularly important for Cabernet Sauvignon,” he says, since raisins can impart precisely the bitter, dry tannins that impair so many Paso Robles Cabs. J. Lohr’s 2006 Cuvée St. E. Bordeaux blend

### IF YOU GO

The best restaurant in Paso Robles, certainly the most popular, is Artisan ([artisanpasorobles.com](http://artisanpasorobles.com)). It’s a crowded, friendly bistro, (below), located in the downtown restaurant district. The fare is upscale and seasonally fresh, and the wine list is almost exclusively local. Other favorites include Bistro Laurent ([bistro-laurent.com](http://bistro-laurent.com)) and Villa Creek ([villacreek.com](http://villacreek.com)).

For lodging, Paso recently saw its first important hotel launch in years, the Hotel Cheval (right), situated off of the Town Square and the restaurant district ([hotelcheval.com](http://hotelcheval.com)). Nearby is the old-fashioned, and a little dowdy but elegant, Paso Robles Inn ([pasoroblesinn.com](http://pasoroblesinn.com)).

When it comes to recreation, the wine tourist obviously will want to take advantage of the many wineries with tasting rooms ([Pasowine.com/wineries](http://Pasowine.com/wineries)). But there’s much more to do, especially between May and November, which is the high dry season. [Visitpaso.com](http://Visitpaso.com) has information on local events. Of course, the Pacific coast, with Big Sur and Hearst Castle, isn’t far, nor is the college town of San Luis Obispo.



PHOTO BOTTOM LEFT COURTESY ARTISAN/ROB STARK PHOTOGRAPHY





Justin Smith, founder and winemaker at Saxum, is not concerned about high alcohol levels in Paso wines. "We have chosen to show respect for [the wine] and let it be what it is," he says.

### The Templeton Gap

It's the conventional wisdom that westside Paso Cab is superior to eastside Cab because of cooler weather, but it's not that easy. The primary air conditioner in Paso Robles is the Templeton Gap, formed by a low spot in the Santa Lucia Mountains that allows maritime air to funnel in from the sea. But these breezes don't automatically stop at the city of Paso Robles (generally taken to be the dividing line between east and west). Nor do they spread everywhere in the west. Some western vineyards, such as Vina Robles' Adelaida Springs, truly do capture the Templeton coolness, and that probably accounts for the elegance and balance of wines from that estate. "The vineyard has less dramatic heat than other parts of the AVA," notes Gubler. Yet there are places east of the freeway that get the last gasps of the maritime air, such as J. Lohr's Creston Vineyard. Winemaker

Peck calls the Cabernet Sauvignon and Cab Franc that constitute the lion's share of his Cuvée St. E "the right varieties in the right location."

Even some wines from well outside the Templeton Gap can shine. Pear Valley's 2006 Distraction comes from San Miguel, possibly the warmest part of Paso Robles, and also from an area north of Highway 46 East that's hot. In theory, it should be too soft and sweet, with 15.5% alcohol, and some people might find it so. Not me. Hendon's judicious barrel selection—he refused to add Merlot "because it just flattened the wine out, muddled it"—is one reason for the wine's allure.

Paso Robles is a case study of a region that's reinventing itself, looking for relevance. Ask any winemaker if he's got it all figured out, and the answer is no. The fine-tuning never stops. For example, as good as Vina Robles' Suendero is, Gubler is thinking of adding Petite Sirah and Syrah, once his new plantings are productive. At Saxum, Smith continues to experiment with stem inclusion in the fermentation, and plays with the percentages of Bone Rock's blend. In Paso, the art of the blend is the name of the game. ☞

For full reviews of Paso Robles wines, turn to this issue's *Buying Guide*, page 65, or click on [buyingguide.winemag.com](http://buyingguide.winemag.com).

(94 points, \$50) was one of the standouts of my tasting.

In the winery, advances in Cabernet include cold soaking the grapes prior to fermentation, the use of wild yeasts, extended maceration, and rigorous barrel selection. Hendon says these techniques help to add

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complexity to his wine. "Getting structure in a Bordeaux blend is the hardest challenge," says Matthias Gubler, the winemaker at Vina Robles, "with grippy, beefy tannins in the middle." Juicy-fruity Cabs are not enough; they need to have that classic Bordeaux bite. Gubler's Vina Robles 2006 Suendero, a Bordeaux blend (91 points, \$49), has just that crunchy texture.

PHOTOS: JON VAN GORDEB; COURTESY OF SAXUM VINEYARDS