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Paso Robles:

California's Hidden Region of 200 Wineries

Mid-California's "Paso" offers everything from dining to shopping to hiking and cycling.

And wine tasting, of course.

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There's a very charming California wine region you may not have heard of. It's becoming more and more popular for wine tourism because it is located halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. It's Paso Robles.

The area is famous for its red wines now, but it began as a farming district, with growers selling their grapes to winemakers north and south of the area. Today, the town of Paso Robles' historic, Spanish-style central plaza is bursting with wine tasting rooms, restaurants and boutiques, and is one of California's most attractive old-style town centers.

It's hard to imagine that only a few decades ago this square was nearly deserted, lined with empty shopfronts

alternating with basic utility retailers like auto parts stores. At that time, the industry in the area was called agriculture: growing grapes and other crops. Since then, agricultural activity has flourished and transformed itself from simply grape-growing into a plethora of fine wineries. There are over 200 wineries in the Paso Robles region now.

One of the great benefits of winery growth – in addition to making more great wines available – is the explosion in tourism which has benefited the entire community as well as vacationers here. Visitors now have wonderful places to stay, shop and dine in the area. Hiking, cycling and other outdoor activities lure additional travelers with year-round appeal. Wine tasting

remains high on the list of a large percentage of sightseers.

Thirty-five years ago there were only 5,000 acres of vineyards with just over a dozen wineries in the Paso Robles area, and the accepted wisdom was that this was no place for cabernet. A few young, forward-thinking winemakers performed their own analysis of the climate and soil types, and they began planting anyway, soon disproving that theory. Justin Winery, Eberle Winery and J. Lohr are three notable pioneers that continue to produce excellent cabernet-based wines (as well as other wines).

"Paso," as the inhabitants call it, is located in the Central Coast area of California, but it's inland, about five miles from the Pacific Ocean. Every

day, the ocean sends cool air and fog through mountain passes to some of the vineyard areas. In addition to the chilly Pacific air, substantial fluctuations in the day-to-night temperatures aid in the grapes' development and help to maintain both aromatics and lively acidity in the wines. There is also a great disparity in rainfall within the region, from forty inches per year on the westernmost hillsides to a mere nine inches on the plains. This climactic variation allows many different grapes to thrive in the region, both white and red. Micro-climates and soil diversity make it possible to cultivate forty-seven different grape varieties in Paso. In addition to the previously mentioned Bordeaux varieties, grapes from Spain, Italy, and France's Rhone and Burgundy regions are also thriving in specially selected vineyard sites. Over half of the grapes grown in the Paso Robles region are red Bordeaux varieties: cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot. Now there are a total of 40,000 acres of vineyards planted here. Red Bordeaux varieties comprise 55%, or 22,000 acres,



with over half of that being cabernet sauvignon.

Today there are eleven sub-regions in Paso Robles, with further variations delineated by different soil types in which the grapes grow, including former ocean floors and rivers, serpentine rock of magnesium, beds of shale as well as calcareous, limestone and other underlying rock strata which have

formed in the past sixty million years of earth cooling, plates colliding to form mountains -- and the general disturbances surrounding an earthquake-prone geological line in California named the San Andreas Fault, which runs just to the west of the region. Each type of soil contributes different characteristics to finished wines, either directly or indirectly.





To highlight the original Cabernet Sauvignon wines from this region, in 2012 producers formed a “Cabernet Collective” and developed Cab Camp, a program of annual events to introduce media and trade and, by extension, consumers, to Paso’s Cabernet Sauvignon and other wines made with Bordeaux grape varieties. When we went out to attend Cab Camp, we also visited quite a few wineries. The wineries were established as family businesses, some prioritizing tourism and tasting rooms and others looking at growing their production; all investing in their vineyards and wineries to increase the quality of their wines. Here are some of the best Bordeaux variety wines we tasted in Paso Robles, in alphabetical order.



Paso Robles' Best Bordeaux-Style Wines

- **2014 ALLEGRETTO VINEYARDS & WINERY CABERNET SAUVIGNON, WILLOW CREEK DISTRICT:** sharp wood aromas giving way to floral and red fruit, with nice lively red-fruit acidity on the palate extending into the finish (\$75).
- **2015 ANCIENT PEAKS WINERY MERLOT, SANTA MARGARITA RANCH:** good strawberry and raspberry fruity fine tannins adding notes of olive and tobacco backed by nice acidity, smooth on the palate (\$20).
- **2014 DAOU VINEYARDS & WINERY SOUL OF A LION, ADELAIDA DISTRICT:** with a subtle emphasis on cooperage, this wine displays structure, fruit and tannin showing great ageing potential in the winery's quest to become a "California first growth." (\$155).
- **2015 HOPE FAMILY WINES' TREANA CABERNET SAUVIGNON:** nice warm, gentle leather aromas, then big, dark fruit on the palate with well-integrated tannins (\$30).
- **2013 J. LOHR VINEYARDS & WINES CUVÉE PAU:** good fruit, lively acidity on the palate and fine, strong tannins in the finish. (\$50).
- **2012 OPOLO VINEYARDS PETIT VERDOT:** smooth woody notes and red fruits, good acidity making the wine bright yet soft with a lively finish (\$39).
- **2014 PARRISH FAMILY VINEYARD SILKEN RESERVE CABERNET SAUVIGNON:** plummy and buttery to start, then creamy and chocolatey on the palate (\$50).
- **2014 THE FARM WINERY CABERNET SAUVIGNON, CARDINAL, ADELAIDA DISTRICT:** begins with typical California eucalyptus and a hint of tomato vine, remains complex and balanced on the palate and in the finish (\$90).
- **2013 VINA ROBLES CABERNET SAUVIGNON, MOUNTAIN ROAD RESERVE:** rich cassis balancing graphite and chalk, with florals and a touch of leather (\$54).

