
TRAVEL

The Grit and Grace of Paso Robles

Great wine, delicious food and luxury digs Come with small-town charm on California's Central Coast



Chris Leschinsky

In Paso Robles, wineries on the west side of Highway 101, such as Law Wine Estates, experience a cooling effect from the breezes and fog borne by the nearby Pacific Ocean.



By MaryAnn Worobiec

Jun 30, 2019

Paso Robles is no longer in the middle of wine's nowhere. The region has become a bustling destination, regularly attracting more than a million visitors a year for its world-class wines, modern tasting rooms, luxury accommodations and wine-friendly restaurants. Paso, as it's known among locals, has a quaint downtown, a ruggedly beautiful

countryside and an infusion of new talent that makes it one of today's most exciting places for wine in California.

Located along Highway 101 midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles (about a four-hour drive from either) and about 25 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, the heart of the city of Paso Robles is its town square—an inviting green patch surrounded by restaurants, shops and more than 20 wine bars. On one end of the square, winemakers gather in the morning at Spearhead Coffee to discuss the weather over lattes. Across the green, the nightlife includes a Prohibition-style speakeasy located in the back of Pappy McGregor's Irish pub. Adjacent to that is the family-friendly SLO Sweets, a candy shop with a rainbow of treats from your childhood.

And something magical happens when you drive just 10 minutes from the town square—there are miles of winding roads, rambling vineyards, lichen-covered oak trees (Paso Robles means "pass of the oaks" in Spanish) and plenty of working farms to remind you that cattle were once the region's defining feature.

Much of Paso's charm comes from its cowboy roots and rustic vibe, but the region is evolving. Thirty years ago, there were fewer than 20 wineries here; now there are more than 200. A cattle drive used to run through downtown to kick off the California Mid-State Fair; now, boutique hotels and high-end restaurants featuring global cuisine are the draw. Tasting experiences have become more sophisticated, with sit-down offerings and library pourings.

Longtime residents are confident they can keep the relaxed feeling of the place, though. "It was a little more Wild West; now it's a bit tamer," says Russell From of Herman Story, whose winery and tasting room lie near the town center. From's tasting room is regularly full of visitors sampling his distinctive wines, whose eye-catching labels carry memorable names such as Late Bloomer and Casual Encounters. He sells T-shirts that read, "Paso Robles: It Has That New Winery Smell."

There is plenty of new energy in Paso. Tin City is one of Paso's newest and most exciting spots—a former warehouse district transformed into a hub of urban garage wineries where you can chat with winemakers as they work or sample their wines in hip, stylish tasting rooms. A strong sense of community exists among these new winemakers, reminiscent of the bootstrap collaboration of the generation of winemakers just before it.

"We all started by purchasing grapes and renting space," explains Matt Trevisan of Linne Calodo, a Rhône specialist who launched his brand 20 years ago. "Now we are reinvesting; now we are planting vineyards and building wineries. I hope we turn multigenerational. That's the big test, to continue what we do."

Two-thirds of the wineries in the area make fewer than 5,000 cases a year, and most are family-owned. You're likely to run into the winemaker when you visit a tasting room. And even as Paso has solidified its reputation for wine quality, its wineries still offer reasonable prices. "You can find world-class wines for \$45 or \$60," points out Daou's Daniel Daou, whose Cabernets fall in that range. Meanwhile, Daou and others openly discuss their research to constantly improve their practices. Daou has been doing trials on his wine production, creating his own yeast and phenolic system. The rewards are clear. "We are attracting a higher clientele now that we are producing a higher-end Cabernet," says Daou.

Eric Jensen of Booker, whose 2014 Oublié red was the No. 10 wine of Wine Spectator's 2017 Top 100, is obsessed with anthocyanin levels in wine, and he's working on a program to make more consistent wines. He's also building a cave and has plans to update the tasting room. "I still have that love affair with making wine, but this is about preciseness. I feel we owe it to the consumer," says Jensen.

There is an ongoing, complex conversation about what the "Paso style" of wine is. The region suffers from a lingering reputation for having a

hot climate, and wines that are overripe and one-dimensional, but in fact, Paso makes diverse styles of wine. Top-scorers range from big, lush Grenache- and Syrah-based reds to crisp whites and firm Cabernets. Winemaker Sherman Thacher of Thacher smiles when he's asked what his focus is. "Diversity," he says. "I can't help but experiment with wines." Austin Hope agrees. "Diversity. That's the word we use for Paso. Not just the regions but the wines and styles."

Helping tell the story of Paso's diversity are the 11 new American Viticultural Areas that were approved in 2014. The region encompasses 614,000 acres, 40,000 of which are planted to wine grapes. Until the new AVAs were identified, Paso Robles had been the largest un-subdivided AVA in California. By comparison, Napa and Sonoma are both much smaller areas in terms of acreage but contain 16 and 18 sub-AVAs, respectively. These new districts have helped delineate distinct winegrowing regions: Willow Creek's lower elevation and morning fog make it ideal for Rhône varieties, while Adelaida's higher elevation and clay soils have made it a focal point for Cabernet producers.

Before these subregions were designated, the only distinction was between vineyards on the east side of Highway 101 and those on the west side, where the abundance of calcareous, limestone-rich soils and rocky hillsides benefiting from a cooling proximity to the Pacific Ocean have lured most of the best producers. There are 40 different grape varieties planted in pockets all over Paso. "The sub-AVAs are giving the region some definition," explains winemaker Jordan Fiorentini of Epoch Estate Wines.

Tourism is steady year-round. An increase in nonstop flights to the nearby San Luis Obispo airport is bringing in more visitors from around the country. A surge of new hotel projects will potentially bring the number of hotel rooms from 1,400 to 2,700. But things do slow down midweek in tasting rooms and hotels, so deals can be found. Appointments are preferred or suggested, to provide intimate tasting

room experiences and attentive customer service, and you'll find most tasting rooms charge a fee. Plenty of spots are kid- and/or dog-friendly, but again, call ahead to confirm.

There are a handful of projects under way that will further change the landscape. Paso Market Walk, just north of town, is scheduled to open later this year. This 16,000-square-foot marketplace is the vision of Debby Baldwin, former co-owner of Justin Vineyards and Winery. There will be a ramen restaurant, a bakery, a gelato shop, a nursery and even a vegan cheese shop. Meanwhile, ground has broken on Sensario, a 380-acre resort that includes 80 guest casitas, a conference center, a café and a wine center. It will also include a "discovery" garden, which is described as including a maze, a waterfall and art installations.

Locals are perhaps most excited about the new downtown restaurant in the works, which will be led by Julien Asseo, former executive chef at Restaurant Guy Savoy at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. Asseo, who grew up in the region, the son of vintner Stephan Asseo, is a local boy made good.

As Paso settles into this emerging identity as a posh but cozy destination, its future shows plenty of promise and opportunity to grow in new directions. As Linne Calodo's Trevisan suggests, "We are a different big thing than we were 20 years ago. We keep reinventing ourselves over and over again."

WHERE TO EAT

BL BRASSERIE

1202 Pine St.

Telephone (805) 226-8191

Website bistrolaurent.com

Open Lunch, Tuesday to Saturday; dinner, daily

Cost Moderate

Corkage \$30

After 21 years as Bistro Laurent, chef Laurent Grangien's restaurant got a make-under and reemerged as BL Brasserie, focusing on a succinct menu of classic French cuisine in a more casual but still very cheerful setting. Escargot, oysters, mussels, onion soup, croque monsieur and a salad lyonnaise are fresh and tasty. The wine list offers plenty of bubbly options and balances local wines with their French counterparts-like a TH Vineyard Syrah The Hedge 2013 (\$115) and a Château de Beaucastel Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2015 (\$145).

FISH GAUCHO

1244 Park St.

Telephone (805) 239-3333

Website fishgaucho.com

Open Dinner, daily

Cost Moderate

Corkage \$15

A large blue fish hook and an ivory statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe set the stage at the entrance to this high-ceilinged, boisterous hacienda of seafood, which boasts a selection of 250 tequilas and mezcals. This is definitely the place to relax with a margarita after a day of wine tasting. Executive chef Chris Beckett crafts a menu filled with ocean-based delicacies, including perfectly seared fresh diver scallops and richly flavored ahi enchiladas. There's also a selection of steaks and chops grilled over oak. The compact wine list is well-priced and features local stars such as Tablas Creek, Linne Calodo and Booker.-Kim Marcus

HATCH ROTISSERIE & BAR

835 13th St.

Telephone (805) 221-5727

Website hatchpasorobles.com

Open Dinner, daily

Cost Moderate

Corkage \$13

A welcoming staff and a tempting menu based on wood-fired American fare recommend this lively eatery. Hot skillet cornbread is served with honey, brown butter and sea salt. Fire-roasted hen of the woods mushrooms are accented with soy, aioli and Parmesan. The house special of half a roasted chicken with buttermilk dip and house-fermented hot sauce comes on a wood plank. There are daily specials too: Monday, it's fried chicken; Wednesday's baby back ribs come with a finger-licking sauce. The cocktail program is strong, with signature drinks, and there's a tidy list of local wines on tap, like Linne Calodo Slacker 2016 (\$15 a glass and \$60 a carafe).

IL CORTILE RISTORANTE

608 12th St.

Telephone (805) 226-0300

Website ilcortileristorante.com

Open Dinner, daily

Cost Moderate

Corkage \$20

Award of Excellence

This intimate spot is popular among locals, who enjoy executive chef Santos MacDonal's seasonal Italian fare such as grilled octopus or a veal chop with porcini mushroom sauce. Homemade pastas-like the toothsome pappardelle with wild boar ragù, or fettuccine salsiccia, a spinach fettuccine with house-made sausage, white wine and Pecorino Romano-are a big draw too. A Wine Spectator Award of Excellence winner since 2014, Il Cortile has one of the best wine lists in the area, with nearly 300 offerings including a strong selection of Italian wines. There are also Coravin pours, including Gaja Sito Moresco 2014 (\$30 a glass) and Gaja Ca' Marcanda 2014 (\$25 a glass).

LA COSECHA BAR & RESTAURANT

835 12th St.

Telephone (805) 237-0019

Website lacosechabr.com

Open Lunch and dinner, Wednesday to Monday; brunch, Sunday

Cost Moderate

Corkage \$20

Award of Excellence

Proprietors Santos and Carole MacDonal bring their talents to Spanish and Latin cuisine at La Cosecha, a sister restaurant to Il Cortile. Flavors are vibrant, and the dishes feature spiced and herbal touches that make them intriguing matches to wine. Flaky Honduran beef and potato empanadas called pastelitos catracho are a fine choice. Stone-fired pizzas include a Mediterranean-influenced lamb sausage, goat cheese and marjoram option. There's a paella of the day, and the house special is moqueca, a Brazilian seafood stew with coconut milk. The Award of Excellence-winning wine list focuses on local producers, with additional depth in Spain, Argentina and Chile.

SOMM'S KITCHEN

849 13th St.

Telephone (805) 369-2344

Website sommskitchen.com

Open Lunch and dinner, Thursday to Sunday

Cost Expensive

Ian Adamo worked in award-winning restaurants all over the world before settling in downtown Paso Robles to create his one-man restaurant, educational experience and retail shop. It's just Adamo behind the counter in front of 14 seats, preparing and plating 10 courses with 10 different wines while describing the dishes and the wines he's chosen. The menu varies regularly-one night the starter was elegant, paper-thin ribbons of melon topped with nutmeg, while an entrée was cedar-roasted duck breast spiced with cinnamon and clove. He features local wines, sometimes contrasting them with Old World

versions. The experience is at once intimate, welcoming, delicious and informative.

THE RESTAURANT AT JUSTIN

11680 Chimney Rock Road

Telephone (805) 238-6932

Website justinwine.com

Open Lunch, Thursday to Saturday; dinner, Tuesday to Saturday (three seatings available); brunch, Sunday

Cost Expensive

Corkage \$25 for each non-Justin wine

Award of Excellence

Founded in 1981, Justin is one of the wineries that put Paso Robles on the map. A recently renovated, modern tasting room and the three-room Just Inn offer polished elegance in a quiet, remote setting. But it's the restaurant on the property that stands out the most, ranking among the best fine-dining experiences in the area. Now under the direction of executive chef Rachel Haggstrom, the menu offers seasonal, wine-friendly dishes served with precision. There are more than 250 wines on the list, an Award of Excellence winner since 2006. A new tasting room downtown on 12th Street off the park offers cozy dining in a convenient setting.

THOMAS HILL ORGANICS

1313 Park St.

Telephone (805) 226-5888

Website thomashillorganics.com

Open Lunch, Monday to Friday; dinner, daily; brunch, Sunday

Cost Moderate

Corkage \$20

The year-round patio tucked between buildings in downtown Paso Robles is a favorite choice for locals for its charming atmosphere and farm-to-table cuisine. Braised pork belly, short ribs, and a rotating fish

selection served with a crispy caper verde sauce are some of the most popular dishes. But executive chef Kurt Metzger has such a way with vegetables that the black lentil tacos with carrot ginger puree and candied jalapeños, and the savory maitaki mushroom shepherd's pie, are just as appealing. There are about 75 selections on the wine list, most under \$65, many of them local.

WHERE TO STAY

ALLEGRETTO VINEYARD RESORT

2700 Buena Vista Drive

Telephone (805) 369-2500

Website allegrettovineyardresort.com

Rooms 171

Suites 14

Rates \$279-\$699

Allegretto opened in late 2015 as the area's first resort. It's a beautiful property, situated on 20 acres and surrounded by vineyards and orchards. The Mediterranean-inspired architecture, grounds and gardens are vast, with art and antiques from all over the world. There's a saline pool, with private cabanas and a poolside bar, as well as a bocce ball court and a spa. Some rooms have semiprivate balconies, kitchenettes and fireplaces, and pet-friendly accommodations are available.

HOTEL CHEVAL

1021 Pine St.

Telephone (805) 226-9995

Website hotelcheval.com

Rooms 16

Rates \$345-\$525

It would be hard to do better than this boutique luxury hotel, starting with the thoughtful contemporary design and warm staff (not to

mention the welcome cookies from the nearby Brown Butter Cookie Company). Located just off the downtown square, Cheval is walking distance from dozens of restaurants and tasting rooms. Each room has a fireplace and fine quality linens, towels, robes and slippers. There are equestrian details everywhere-rooms are named after famous horses, and the "do not disturb" hanger resembles a horse's tail. A central courtyard has a handful of fireplaces, and as guests mingle there at night, a butler comes by and makes complimentary s'mores. There's a library with a candy station you can help yourself to, and the Pony Club bar is the site of a gourmet breakfast spread in the morning and a wine bar at night. There are plans for an expansion across the street with additional rooms.

PASO ROBLES INN & THE PICCOLO

1103 Spring St.

Telephone (800) 676-1713; (805) 238-2660

Website pasoroblesinn.com; pasoroblesinn.com/the-piccolo

Rooms 98

Suites 6

Rates \$150-\$350

Located on the downtown square, Paso Robles Inn has a history dating to 1889. The comfortable, clean rooms have been updated regularly, and the inn's gardens are beautiful and relaxing. Winery Row features 18 rooms themed after local wine estates, each with a private spa tub on a balcony or patio. Scheduled to open this summer, an adjacent property called the Piccolo will bring 24 luxury rooms, with modern furnishings, temperature-controlled wine lockers and a rooftop bar.

WINERIES & TASTING ROOMS TO VISIT

ALTA COLINA

2825 Adelaida Road

Telephone (805) 227-4191

Website altacolinawine.com

Open Daily

Tastings \$20

The father-daughter team of Bob and Maggie Tillman run this small winery on a beautiful property of rolling hills covered in vines. Consider an upgrade to the Summit Vineyard Tasting, conducted under a huge oak tree with vineyard views. For glamping fans, the Trailer Pond is a collection of five vintage trailers available for rent amid the vines.

BOOKER

2644 Anderson Road

Telephone (805) 237-7367

Website bookerwines.com

Open By appointment

Tastings \$30

Eric Jensen launched his Booker label in 2005 and quickly rose to prominence as one of the top producers in the area. His 2014 Oublié, an expressive Grenache-Mourvèdre-Counoise blend, was among *Wine Spectator's* Top 10 Wines of 2017. In addition to Booker's well-known Rhône-grape bottlings, check out My Favorite Neighbor, a new project showcasing Paso Robles Cabernet.

DAOU

2777 Hidden Mountain Road

Telephone (805) 226-5460

Website daouvineyards.com

Open By appointment

Tastings \$40

One of the most striking tasting rooms in the area, Daou offers plenty of wow factor, from the backlit marble countertops to the spectacular views of Daou Mountain, as it has been dubbed by locals. The winery is

known for top-notch hospitality and food-and-wine pairings; the Chardonnays and Cabernets stand out in particular.

EPOCH

7505 York Mountain Road, Templeton

Telephone (805) 237-7575

Website epochwines.com

Open By appointment

Tastings \$20

You absolutely must make the 20-minute drive outside downtown Paso to see this stunning estate-the York Mountain Winery built in the late 1800s. Current owners Bill and Liz Armstrong had the remains of the original property meticulously restored, stone by stone in some cases. The result blends this rich history with a modern feel. Winemaker Jordan Fiorentini makes beautiful Rhône-style wines.

HERMAN STORY

1227 Paso Robles St.

Telephone (805) 237-2400

Website hermanstorywines.com

Open Thursday through Monday, or by appointment

Tastings \$20

You'll find this unassuming spot a short drive from downtown Paso, adjacent to the freeway, next to a tire shop. It offers a chance to take a peek at an energetic urban winery and also sample proprietor Russell From's big, bold wines, which encompass single-vineyard expressions as well as hearty blends, using purchased grapes from all over the Central Coast.

HOPE FAMILY

1585 Live Oak Road

Telephone (805) 238-4112

Website hopefamilywines.com

Open Daily

Tastings \$15

The Hope family has been farming in Paso for more than 30 years and now has five wine brands-Liberty School, Treana, Quest, Austin Hope and Troublemaker-which produce a variety of wines. There is a traditional tasting bar, but the cozy lounge with sofas and the outdoor seating areas offer more memorable settings.

LAW

3885 Peachy Canyon Road

Telephone (805) 226-9200

Website lawstatewines.com

Open By appointment

Tastings \$25

Don and Susie Law released their first bottlings with the 2010 vintage, and the wines, now overseen by winemaker Philipp Pfunder, are among the most exciting Rhône-style offerings in the area. The eye-catching tasting room is set on a hill with terrific views.

LINNE CALODO

3030 Vineyard Drive

Telephone (805) 227-0797

Website linnecalodo.com

Open Daily, by appointment

Cost \$20

Linne Calodo founder Matt Trevisan recently reopened a modern tasting room replete with art and music to bring an upbeat feel to the visitor experience. His wines-with names like Martyr, Contrarian, Problem Child and Sticks and Stones-are thoughtful expressions of Paso's best.

TABLAS CREEK

9339 Adelaida Road

Telephone (805) 237-1231

Website tablascreek.com

Open Daily

Tastings Start at \$15; tours free

No tour of Paso wine country would be complete without a visit to this pioneering estate. A partnership between the family of wine importer Robert Haas and the Perrin family of France's Château de Beaucastel, Tablas Creek helped stoke the Rhône revolution here by importing and propagating Beaucastel vine cuttings in the early 1990s. The property boasts 120 acres of vineyards, while expansive terraces with shaded tables are primed for picnics outside the cellar door. -K.M.

TH ESTATE

870 Arbor Road

Telephone (805) 238-2083

Website thestatewines.com

Open By appointment

Tastings \$25

Terry and Jennifer Hoage moved to Paso Robles in 2000 to raise their children in a rural setting. Now they are some of the region's leading vintners, and the estate showcases their stylish wines, from the bold Rhône-style bottlings of TH Estate to the supple Decroux Pinot Noirs. Consider a private tour or tasting to best enjoy the beautiful property and friendly staff.

THACHER

8355 Vineyard Drive

Telephone (805) 237-0087

Website thacherwinery.com

Open Daily

Tastings \$20

It's easy to see why Sherman and Michelle Thacher picked this serene spot to raise their family and build their small brand. Their offerings range from a sparkling wine to a delicate Cinsault to a Zinfandel to Rhône blends. Outdoor seating lets you soak in the atmosphere, and make sure to check out the 100-year-old historic Kentucky Ranch barn on the property.

VILLA CREEK CELLARS

5995 Peachy Canyon Road

Telephone (805) 238-7145

Website villacreek.com

Open By appointment

Tastings \$20

For nearly 20 years, Cris and JoAnn Cherry ran both a winery and a downtown restaurant by the same name, but they closed the beloved Villa Creek eatery in 2017 to focus on wine. They recently added a biodynamic estate vineyard, Maha, to their strong portfolio of Rhône-style offerings. The tasting room features interior walls made from the property's fallen walnut trees.