

# The Washington Post

## Paso Robles: The best wine region you may not know

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The Associated Press

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PASO ROBLES, Calif. -- The February issue of a respected wine industry trade publication gives only one of the world's wines both a rarefied 98 score and the top spot in the "highly recommended" section.

Near perfection came from Saxum, a well-regarded but obscure winery in Paso Robles, a one-time California cow town becoming a superior wine-producing region known by few non-aficionados outside the state.

Located on California's Central Coast, the Paso Robles viticultural area's consistent quality and relatively moderate land prices have combined for phenomenal growth.

In fewer than 20 years, the number of wineries has grown from 30 to 250 and counting, plus at least 600 hopefuls making boutique bottles at custom crush co-ops to hawk at restaurants and local wine bars.

Esteemed reviewer Robert Parker has said the region of rolling, oak-studded hills holds California's greatest potential. Winemakers swear by a climate and limestone-infused soils that mimic the

southern Rhone region of France.

Most are family operations that make fewer than 5,000 cases a year, which make them impossible for distributors seeking consistent availability to market nationally. Saxum bottles fewer than 3,000 cases and its wine club has a wait list. (The winery's 2007 James Berryhill that earned Wine Spectator's 98 - and 100 from Parker in October - sells for \$67, compared with \$375 for a French 98 in the same issue.)

"The reason people don't know Paso is because they don't see it in the marketplace. Maybe 20 are distributed now; it would help the region to have more," said Deborah Baldwin, co-owner of Justin Wine Co., founded in 1981 when there were seven wineries in the region.

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Hugging the coast midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, the 666,618 acres of the Paso Robles Viticulture Area is California's largest - three times the size of Napa. It comprises just more than half of the Central Coast wine region that stretches 250 miles from San Francisco to Santa Barbara.

Grapes have grown there since the Mission padres settled in the late 1700s. In the 1980s, the flat and sprawling east side became home to large commercial wineries such as Eberle and Meridian and later Gallo, Robert Mondavi and Kendall-Jackson farming 25,000 acres. But the cooler west side, where 5,000 acres are planted across hilly terrain, is where winemakers are scoring with critics.

With a production of 70,000 cases, Justin has tallied international accolades and become the region's vaunted behemoth and image maker: its 1994 Isosceles, the iconic blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, was named "Best Blended Wine in the World" at the London International Wine & Spirit Competition. Wine Spectator named its 1997 Isosceles No. 6 in the world.

There is a wait for Isosceles reserve, but prices range from just more than \$60 for Isosceles to \$18.50 for the winery's screw top "Orphan" blend of leftover juices from the hand-harvested single vintages.

Justin draws 40,000 visitors a year, many of whom meander the wine trails to discover a new favorite or obscure winemaker. Or, not obscure: Miss America 1957 Marian McKnight owns Carmody McKnight with her husband. Former NFL defensive back Terry Hoage produces 2,100 cases of Rhone-inspired wines nearby.

"We realize we're all in this together," says Justin Baldwin, who believes the success of one increases exposure and recognition for the others.

Paso Robles has half as many wineries as Napa, but like Napa its climate includes coastal breezes and stifling inland valley heat. The wine boom and influx of oenophiles have transformed downtown Paso from an ag town of 18,000 in 1990 to a bustling tourist mecca of 30,000 with a lineup of sophisticated restaurants lacking in other cities its size.

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"The wine here just kicks butt," says Bruce Davison, visiting Gray Wolf with his wife, Genevieve, from Los Angeles, three hours away by car.

In a state known for Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, the new crop of vintners in Paso Robles are self-described "Rhone Rangers," plumbing limestone soils of the Pacific Plate with Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre vines from the southern Rhone region of Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

The terroir is so similar, when wine importer Robert Haas went looking with the sixth generation of France's Perrin family of Chateau de Beaucastel fame for a New World site, their four-year search ended in 1989 at a 120-acre site west of Paso Robles.

For their Tablas Creek they imported clones of the French winery's prized 13 varietals that could be legally blended into Chateauneuf-du-Pape wines (today the number is 20), and pioneered the organic growing movement.

Growing organically "is an important part of making wines that reflect place," said Jason Haas, Robert's son and general manager. As if on cue he bent over to pick a lady bug from a clover leaf in a vineyard of Grenache Blanc.

Relatively affordable land prices made it possible for Rich Hartenberger, a former hospital bedding salesman from Chicago, to own Midnight Cellars with his family. They're just over the hill from the ultramodern winery of Ron and Marilyn Denner of the Ditch Witch fortune.

Most hand-craft their wines with small staffs, so odds are tasting-room visitors will be served by the owner/winemaker.

"You can walk in any time and see me here," said former environmental attorney Jeff Pipes, who with his wife, Florence Wong, has created at Pipestone Vineyards a 10-acre organic, solar-powered feng shui paradise that he plows with a team of draft horses.

Napa prices for land and the best wines are beyond many peoples' reach. But Paso is much more approachable, Justin's Deborah Baldwin says.

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"The winemakers here today didn't come here with an attitude," Baldwin said.  
"Will it stay that way forever, I don't know."

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