

August 2009



The Paso Robles area offers excellent wines

Wine Wisdom

Praiseworthy Paso Robles Picks

By Ed Schwartz

To many wine lovers, Paso Robles and the wineries in the surrounding area may not be household names. All the better for those familiar with the terroir (you can soon count yourself among us), because the wines are generally excellent, without the higher price tags of their Napa and Sonoma counterparts.

Let's begin this wine adventure by locating Paso Robles—it's about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, at the crossroads of highways 46 and 101. The Paso Robles AVA is no small bunch of grapes. It is comprised of over 26,000 planted acres and is home to 180 wineries.

As a winemaking district, Paso Robles has been around since 1797, and, by 1815, some twenty-two acres were planted in mission grape, three miles north of Mission San Miguel Arcangel. After secularization of the missions, the vines withered until European farmers came to the area after this land became part of California.

The first name to farm wine grapes there was a Frenchman, Pierre Hypolite Dallidet, who planted his vineyard in what is now San Luis Obispo, in 1853. An Englishman, named Henry Ditmas, followed. He was the first one to plant zinfandel, which is a perfect grape for this warm-weather area.

A commercial vineyard was planted by Andrew York in the 1870s. Again, zinfandel took pride of place; York Mountain Winery is still in operation.

Following this, increasing numbers of families put down their wine roots here, including historic Italian names, such as Martinelli, Busi, Dusi, Vosti, and Bianchi. Much of this land is today being farmed by members of the third and fourth generations of these families.

Even more fame came to the area in the form of the famous Polish statesman and renowned concert pianist Ignace Paderewski, who came to Paso Robles for the hot springtime weather, which brought some relief to his aching hands. He purchased two-thousand acres of land, and his workers planted zinfandel and petite syrah. The wines were made at York Mountain and won many awards.

Paso Robles continued to grow in scope and stature. By the 1980s, many top wineries, looking for expansion, found that this area has wonderfully diverse soils and microclimates, and the land was much less expensive than Napa and Sonoma. **Gary Eberle** was one of the first of the modern Paso pioneers. In 1988, **Jerry Lohr** established J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines and planted cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and syrah on an impressive two-thousand-acre vineyard. The famous Meridian Vineyard was also established that year by **Chuck Ortman**—both labels are widely distributed.

Many small and mid-sized wineries also came to Paso Robles—names such as Arciero, EOS Estate, Anglin, Arroyo Robles, and, my favorite name, Midlife Crisis Winery. Having survived a midlife crises myself (who hasn't?), I fully understand the inspiration of owners **Kevin** and **Jill Mittan**, who decided that their crisis was to own and operate a very small winery. Fittingly, early in the business planning, they considered dubbing the winery “Insane.”

Other more “major” wineries are also worth noting. The Perrin family—famed producers of one of France’s great wine names, Château de Beaucastel—and founder of Vineyard Brands, importer of Beaucastel, **Robert Haas**, formed the joint venture Tablas Creek. The focus has been on planting fine red Rhone varietals such as mourvèdre, grenache noir, syrah, and counoise, as well as whites, such as roussanne and viognier. The Tablas Creek tasting room is notably beautiful.

Another favorite is Justin Vineyards & Winery, founded in 1981 by **Justin** and **Deborah Baldwin**. The Baldwins planted Bordeaux varietals, such as cabernet sauvignon. The brand became famous for proprietary Bordeaux blends; the most famous, and likely best wine, is Isosceles. Also outstanding, a blend dubbed Justification, and a reserve tempranillo—Spain’s famous red wine grape.

Our Marin Wine Knows tasters tried many Paso wines recently and generally found them fantastic. Some highlights:

Ancient Peaks 2006 Merlot—medium body, soft, graceful with delicious fruit. An elegant wine. The 2006 syrah was lovely—very bright, smooth, and delicious with great varietal expression. The 2006 cabernet sauvignon had focused cabernet flavors in a medium body; elegant wine—very easy to love.

Kiamie Kuvée 2006 Red Wine Blend—rich and bright with a long, engaging finish. The 2005 cabernet sauvignon is excellent with grand cabernet flavors in a super-rich style.

Derby 2006 Legacy RED—a delightful red wine; medium body and easy to drink.

Justin 2006 Isosceles—year after year, one of the very best red blends from California; refined, silky, and smooth.

Caliza 2006 Companion—bright, juicy, very rich, and very well balanced. A superior red. The syrah also is highly praised for its rich, sweet fruit and elegance.

Hearthstone 2007 Pearl—a delicious white wine; a blend of rousanne and viognier—lively, nice acidity, with deep fruit flavors and excellent body. The 2006 grenache is a fine example of the varietal with a nice, spicy overtone.

Sculpterra 2006 Maquette—a rich, full red wine; a mini-blockbuster—just terrific. The 2006 is so rich in fruit it's almost port-like. "Wow" will do!

J. Lohr 2006 Cuvée POM—a beautiful red wine; lots of delicious fruit that goes on and on. Also loved the J. Lohr PAU—POM is a salute to Pomerol; PAU, a nod to Pauillac.

Calcareous 2006 Tres Violet—rich and complex; a great red wine. The 2006 petit verdot, an early ripening Bordeaux grape, has great, rich, sweet fruit, big and bold. Also, the Twisted Sisters 2006 Meritage is a deep, noble wine with great fruit, structure, and minerality.

Cass 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon—a very big wine—huge in fact; for those who love robust reds, and then some.

Loma Linda 2006 Always Petite, Petite Sirah—An excellent wine, full and rich with lovely, complex flavors and excellent length.

Ed Schwartz has been involved in many aspects of fine wine for 30 years and has worked with top wineries in California, Italy and France. His writings on wine, food and travel have appeared in the *SF Chronicle*, *LA Times* and *Imagemagazine*.