

Four to Watch

The Farm: Mining Paso's West Side

The Farm, a new venture in Paso Robles owned by Santiago and Mercedes Achával of Achával-Ferrer (a highly regarded Malbec producer in Argentina) and Jim and Azmina Madsen, takes its moniker from the nickname of Stanford University, where the two men met while in graduate school in the late 1980s.

During their years at Stanford, the two families became close and spent time in Napa and Sonoma, discovering a shared passion for vineyards and open space. Years later, the Madsens began to look for land in Paso Robles, laying the foundation for what would become their joint venture with the Achávals.

"We already loved [Paso] for its natural beauty, unspoiled vistas and quiet pace of life," says Santiago, 51. "I knew the potential for greatness in wine [in Paso]. I confirmed it with tastings throughout the area."

To jump-start the process, Jim scouted dozens of vineyards, and was later joined by Santiago, who spends most of his time in Mendoza. They were searching for specific sites, particularly hillsides with limestone on the west side of Paso, where most of the best wines come from. Today, they lease about 8 acres for their three wines. The Cardinal, the nickname for Stanford athletics, is mostly Cabernet. The 2009 features a medley of dark berry and mineral flavors. The 2009 Big Game, a reference to the historic Cal-Stanford football rivalry, is mostly Syrah, with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. "This is Bordeaux meets the Rhône," says Achával of the mix of grapes, which occasionally includes Petit Verdot. "We are aiming to create a fusion of size, power and elegance."

Touchy-Feely "is a pure Rhône play," says Achával. "We keep the Grenache portion big [70 to 75 percent] to preserve the feminine, playful character that we get from the Terra Bella vineyard. Syrah anchors this approach with a darker note and protects the Grenache against oxidation with its reductive aspects."

Occasionally, there are single-vineyard bottlings of special lots in special years. Working with the growers, the two owners aim to keep crop loads small. The two families chose Paso "because [it] is such a place that we can't be there and not express its realities in wine," says Achával. "I'm not trying to make another Achával-Ferrer Malbec in Paso. I'm trying to learn from the hills and the soils and from Paso sunlight. We love how Paso Cabernet expresses itself. That's why we're bucking the trend and making both a single-vineyard Cab and a blend with a huge chunk of Cab. But it's not dogmatic. We also love Rhône varieties, and that's why Touchy-Feely has a special place in our heart."

Production is to remain at 1,000 cases, says Achával. Whether or not a dedicated winery will follow depends on how the business evolves.

—James Laube

92 Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles Cardinal 2009	\$90
91 Touchy-Feely Paso Robles 2010	\$60
90 The Big Game Paso Robles 2009	\$75



Santiago and Mercedes Achával and Azmina and Jim Madsen

Favia: A Husband-and-Wife Team

Annie Favia and Andy Erickson are the ultimate Napa Valley power couple: She's a well-known viticulturist, and he's been the winemaker at several cult Cabernet houses, including Screaming Eagle and Harlan. Despite the flashy marquee names they've been associated with, this down-to-earth couple is making sure their own brand, Favia, is equally grounded, focusing on unique vineyard sites that inspire them.

The brand's success with Rhône-style wines from the Sierra Foothills has put a spotlight on what used to be an unassuming wine region. They've had 10 outstanding releases—half of them scoring 95 points or higher—from Ann Kraemer's 46-acre Shake Ridge Vineyard. The couple didn't set out to make Rhône-style wines, though Favia admits they drank plenty of Cornas and Côte-Rôtie during their courtship. But they

were drawn to this vineyard for its distinctive climate and soils, and Kraemer's precision farming.

They make three red Rhône: a Syrah called Quarzo, a Grenache called The Lincoln, and Rompecabezas (Spanish for "jigsaw puzzle"), a blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre. Favia says she considers the wines "personalities," and vineyard practices and winemaking are meant to emphasize—not manipulate—these individual characteristics.