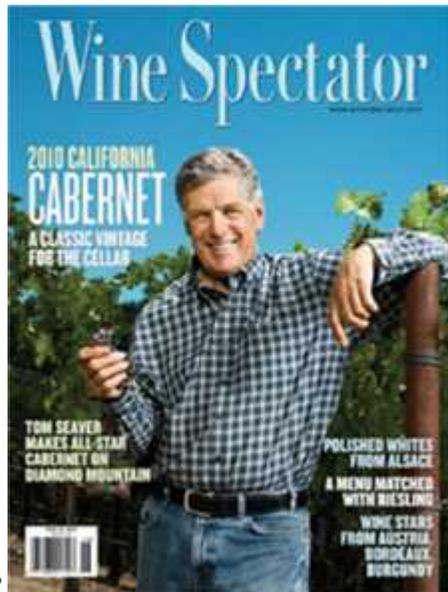


Ripe for Cabernet

In Paso Robles, a boomlet for California's top red bears watching

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While Napa Valley remains the quality leader for California Cabernet Sauvignon, the state has other regions where the grape can excel. One of the most promising is Paso Robles, located midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco on the Central Coast. As a result, Paso is seeing a surge of investment and an influx of winemaking talent.

"If you like big red wine, this is the place to be right now," affirms Paul Kaselionis, vineyard manager for Justin Vineyards & Winery, one of the area's longtime leaders. Paso Robles Cabernets can be complex and elegant, with graceful tannins that make them easy to drink upon release, while still retaining the structure to age. And compared with the high prices commanded by their counterparts from other regions, Paso Robles Cabernets are priced competitively. But Paso Robles Cabernet producers still have a ways to go to fulfill their potential.

So far, only a handful of producers have made outstanding wines (90 or more points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale). Some of the highlights released in the past year include Justin's Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles Reserve 2010 (93, \$50) and Isosceles Reserve 2009 (92, \$98); **The Farm Winery LPF Paso Robles 2009 (92, \$60), a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc**; Daou Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles 2011 (91, \$28); and the Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot blend Passing By Paso Robles 2010 (90, \$45,) from Jada. Paso's microclimates and soils make it ideal for red wines. It can be warmer in summer than Napa—a blessing in recent cool vintages like 2010 and 2011. The appellation also experiences larger diurnal swings during the height of the growing season; the high and low temperatures can differ by as much as 40 to 50 degrees in a single day. That gives grapes a chance to ripen fully, yet retain acidity. Vineyards on

the west side of the region experience constant breezes from the nearby Pacific Ocean, helping to moderate temperatures.

Vintners also point to the region's calcareous soils—rare in most parts of California, but common in great wine regions such as Chablis, Burgundy and Bordeaux. Winemakers believe the lime content and relatively high pH level help Cabernet maintain freshness, even when the flavors are ripe. The friable soils are also porous and well-draining.

It took a while for Paso Robles to evolve into a winemaking hub, but once it got momentum, it's been one of the fastest-growing wine regions in California in recent years. Cabernet Sauvignon has grown along with it—40 percent of the 32,000 acres planted in the region are dedicated to the grape, although wines from Syrah and Grenache have been getting the most attention of late.

Gary Eberle was one of the early pioneers of Paso Robles Cabernet. He tested soil samples in the region while still a student at the University of California, Davis, where a professor told him that Paso Robles was poised to become the next great red wine-producing region in California. That was in the 1970s. "What's happening now, I expected to happen 20 years ago," admits Eberle.

Many of the bright spots over the years have come from Justin, which is credited with setting the bar for Paso Robles Cabernet. Founded in 1981 by Justin Baldwin, the flagship wine, a Cabernet Sauvignon-based blend called Isosceles, regularly earns outstanding scores. A turning point came in 2000, when the 1997 Isosceles was named No. 6 in *Wine Spectator's* Top 100. After that, vintners started to look at Paso Robles more seriously.

Stewart and Lynda Resnick, owners of Fiji Water, POM Wonderful and Teleflora, purchased Justin winery in 2010, and the new owners have invested in remodeling the property and multiplying the estate's vineyard holdings from 60 acres to 600 acres with new plantings. They also hired winemaker Scott Shirley, formerly of Opus One in Napa, to maintain the level of quality as Justin's new vineyards come into fruition. Winemaking details include harvesting and sorting by hand, and fermenting up to 150 different lots separately, which Shirley then blends into Justin's eight different Cabernet bottlings.

Another epicenter of activity is Daou Vineyards. Brothers Georges and Daniel Daou, who retired in their 30s from the software industry, turned their attention to wine when they started purchasing land in western Paso Robles in 2007. Their estate jewel is the former Hoffman Mountain Ranch vineyard, previously owned by Stanley Hoffman, who started the quest to make outstanding wine when he purchased it in the 1960s. Hoffman hired André Tchelistcheff to help him plant Cabernet Sauvignon; the legendary enologist called the property a "jewel of ecological elements."

The Daous have invested heavily in the vineyard, and built an elegant Spanish-style tasting room that rivals the most luxurious wineries in Napa. "I believe I can make Cabernet here to compete with wine from anywhere in the world," says Daniel.

At an altitude of 2,200 feet, and above the influence of coastal fog, their property is the highest-elevation vineyard in the area and provides plenty of sunshine. Daniel wanted to plant more

sophisticated clones than the overproducing Cabernet he saw in the area. To date, he has planted nine different low-yielding clones among his 60 acres of Cabernet. Only free-run wine goes into his flagship Cabernets, while press wine goes into a second label. He has also designed his own tanks, ordered custom French oak barrels and even formulated a proprietary yeast strain with help from a commercial lab.

As Paso's reputation grows, more talent is gravitating to the region, including winemakers from Napa, like Shirley, and Jada's David Galzignato, who worked at Duckhorn and Lewis. There is also an international influence. Bordeaux's Stephan Asseo, who came to Paso Robles in 1996, has had success with his Stephan L'Aventure Estate Cuvée; the 2010 (92, \$85) employs equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, along with Petit Verdot. Santiago Achával, of highly regarded Argentine Malbec producer Achával-Ferrer, founded The Farm Winery with partners in 2009. Their flagship, the Cabernet-Malbec blend Cardinal (2010: 89, \$90), comes from a vineyard in the west side of Paso planted in 1964.

To share ideas and promote the region, Daou has reached out to other Cabernet vintners to help create the Paso Robles Cab Collective, which has started hosting tastings to spread the word about Paso's Cabernet future. "I have to tell you, I am nuts about Cabernet Sauvignon," says Daou. "My heart is with Cabernet. It's complex, it's structured, it ages, and I love the taste of it. It makes me happy." Daou and his fellow Paso vintners are ready to make a lot of other Cabernet drinkers very happy, too.

TOP CABERNETS FROM PASO ROBLES

- 93 **Justin** Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles Reserve 2010 \$50
- 92 **The Farm Winery** LPF Paso Robles 2009 \$60
- 92 **Justin Isosceles** Reserve Paso Robles 2009 \$98
- 91 **Daou** Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles 2011 \$28
- 90 **Eberle** Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles 2010 \$34
- 90 **Eberle** Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles Vineyard Selection 2011 \$20
- 90 **Jada** Passing By Paso Robles 2010 \$45
- 90 **Torrin Tsundere** Torrin Vineyard Paso Robles 2010 \$62