

Destinations
The Next Napa
Alan Farnham, 01.20.03

Haven't heard of Paso Robles yet? Fine. That's the way wine lovers hope to keep it.

There's lots to like about the Napa Valley. So much, in fact, that Napa now ranks among the biggest tourist draws in California, ahead of Yosemite. Five million tourists a year beat a pathway to its door. But not surprisingly, that door is looking scuffed. Tour buses now snake their way through what, 15 years ago, was Eden. Traffic is hellish on the weekends; anybody wanting to make a left-hand turn off Highway 29, the valley's main artery, might just as well try making same-day reservations at the French Laundry.

At more than one winery, glitz has muscled aside charm. After Francis Ford Coppola bought **Inglenook**, he added props from his movies--vampire costumes from *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, a Tucker automobile from *Tucker*, a gunboat from *Apocalypse Now*. The result is what you might call Hollywood and Vines.

Miss the quaint old Napa? The little vineyard whose owner might himself be your host at an inn? Look south, down the coast. Midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles lies Paso Robles, with most of the winemaking potential of Napa but almost none of the traffic jams. Paso's 60 vineyards attract just a million tourists a year.

For most of Paso Robles' history, its grapes went straight into jug wine or undistinguished blends. Then, in the 1980s, a new breed of vintner took stock of soil and climate, and decided Paso (as the locals call it) could do better. Two years ago Robert Parker Jr., the famed wine critic--and a man not noted for rhapsodic endorsements--sampled the wines of **Stephan Vineyards**, a Paso newcomer. Parker pronounced its 1999 L'Aventure vintage "sensational," "profound," "reference points for complexity and quality" and gave it a 92 rating, comparable to far pricier **Mouton Rothschild** or **Cheval Blanc**.

Owner Stephan Asseo, a Frenchman with a puckish, aw-shucks demeanor, shrugs Gallically at all the praise. His wines, he says, owe everything to the *terroir*--the substrate of limestone and clay similar to what one would find in the Rhône valley. Grapes have a hard time growing here, and that is paradoxically good: Less fruit means greater intensity of flavor. Whereas an acre in Napa might yield 6 to 8 tons, an acre here yields 2.5.

"It's quality of fruit that's key," says Asseo, "[not] the equipment or the technology." With a sweep of a callused hand he takes in the steep hillsides of his vineyards. "You can inject millions, but never can you change the *terroir*." After leaving his family's winery in France, Asseo searched the world for a place to start a vineyard of his own--Australia, South Africa, Spain, Napa, Sonoma and Santa Barbara. He chose Paso.

A few miles away, through rolling hills of chaparral and oak, Justin Baldwin and his wife, Deborah, former bankers from Los Angeles, bought their first Paso parcel in 1981. They've since gone on to accumulate a 160-acre vineyard, a winery, an inn and a formidable number of awards.

The 1994 vintage of their premier red, Isosceles, was dubbed "best blended red wine in the world" by the International Wine & Spirit Competition in London in 1997. *Wine Spectator* in 2000 named the 1997 Isosceles number six among its favorite wines of any kind, from anywhere, ahead of a 1998 **Château la Nerthe** Châteauneuf-du-Pape Cuvée des Cadettes.

Great wine alone won't boost the region into Napa's league. It must have restaurants and hotels. Baldwin has built a hostelry on his vineyard property, the tiny (only three rooms) but luxurious Just Inn. On the eastern side of Paso, the owners of another winery, **Martin & Weyrich**, opened Villa Toscana last July. Any fan of Napa's Auberge du Soleil would feel right at home here.

As for restaurants, when French chef Laurent Grangien opened his **Bistro Laurent** five and a half years ago, Paso was still a chicken-fried-steak kind of town. Now Grangien's is one of five or six Napa-class eateries. He has no trouble selling out special tasting dinners built around black truffles or foie gras. In November the James Beard Foundation in New York City showcased some of Bistro Laurent's dishes, paired with Paso's finest wines. "A big honor," says Grangien.

What's still lacking? A signature varietal, in the sense that Napa is associated in the public's mind with cabernet. "We suffer from a lack of focus," says Austin Hope, winemaker and head of viticulture at Treana Winery. "My vision is that we'll be known for our syrahs." His own will debut this year.

Paso isn't Napa yet. But that's one of its prime virtues. (For more information on Paso Robles and how to get there, visit forbes.com/pasorobles.)