



VINE TIMES IT'S A FOLKSY, FRIENDLY WORLD IN PASO ROBLES' WINE COUNTRY.(Travel)

From: [Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\)](#) Date: [August 8, 2004](#)

Daily News Byline: Story and photos by Eric Noland Travel Editor

PASO ROBLES - Bailey, Butler, Lucy and Rebel Rose are sure to become your fast friends in Paso Robles' wine country.

They're dogs.

They lounge in the shade at Pipestone, Doce Robles, Grey Wolf and Dover Canyon wineries, respectively, and as you open your car door, they'll approach with forlorn expressions, as if they haven't been petted in an eternity of minutes. They might drop a stick or a tennis ball at your feet, imploring you to engage them in a game of fetch.

It doesn't take long to feel like one of the family here.

Equidistant between Los Angeles and San Francisco and just inland of the Central Coast, Paso - as the locals call it - doesn't get as much tourist traffic as its wine-country cousins in Napa, Sonoma and Santa Barbara counties, which might account for its warm hospitality and utter lack of pretension.

To the west of U.S. 101, particularly, a number of small boutique wineries have taken root amid a sun-washed landscape of coastal foothills interlaced with narrow farm roads. Finding them is half the fun. You'll wind and dip along the back roads, passing beneath cathedrals of oaks and alongside overgrown walnut orchards, heeding crude signs tacked to fence posts. On one curve, we surprised a covey of perhaps 15 quail that scooted across the road before ultimately taking flight.

The tiny wineries often farm sustainably, use primarily their own grapes and bottle only a few thousand cases a year. In some cases, their wines can be found only at the winery, through their wine clubs or at the occasional local liquor store.

But they've done some exceptional work in recent years playing to their strength - zinfandel, syrah, cabernet sauvignon and other big reds. Earlier this year, Wine Spectator magazine featured the robust, full-bodied wines trickling out of this region.

``In the past, I don't think farmers managed the heat that well in Paso," said Geof Ryan, western region wine buyer for Whole Foods markets. ``But the grape-growing techniques have improved. They continue to evolve. So you get excellent fruit, which translates into fine wine. ... Bright, vibrant zinfandel is what's being produced. And Rhone grapes are doing well."

The winery tasting rooms are often housed in working buildings, with cracked concrete floors and oak barrels stacked along the walls, red wine staining the stave cracks.

The atmosphere is low-key and friendly. There might be a list of wines available for tasting, but if you show interest in a particular varietal, the host is liable to reach below the counter to pull out something special. If you wish to retaste something for comparison's sake, you'll probably be accommodated. And if you inquire about other wineries in the area, you won't hear any petty disparagement.

"We're not at each other's throats here," said Jacob Raines at Dover Canyon Winery as he poured a 2001 Che Vina da Cane (it's a dog's life). "We'll send you to another winery that we like. We're promoting the region as a whole."

Dover Canyon is such a small operation that its tasting sheet reports "only four barrels produced" of the 2001 Barbera, or "only three barrels produced" of the 2001 Bella Zinfandel (a bottle of which now graces our rack).

Not far away, at Pipestone, the tasting room was being manned by co-owner Florence Wong. She and husband Jeff Pipes farm 10 acres and do all the work themselves - quite a feat when you consider that they use no chemicals, preferring to hack at weeds with hoes and build perches for gopher-chasing hawks. Pipes' aversion to chemicals might be understandable: In a former life, he was an environmental engineer and lawyer who tackled toxic waste sites in the upper Midwest.

Among their offerings is a 2003 Rose. "Sometimes we twist people's arms to make them taste it," said Wong. A note on the tasting sheet includes the emphatic assertion, "This is not your mother's rose!" And, indeed, since this grenache is on the skins for only four days, it is crisply dry, bearing no relation to the sweet, overly fruity roses that were so popular in California 30 years ago.

Wong encouraged us to explore the vineyard on the way out. We did, and also peeked in at pens holding goats and poultry, before driving through a walnut grove where stacks of white beehives hummed with activity.

Many of Paso Robles' wineries are like this - pleasures to visit beyond what's being poured in the tasting rooms.

Adjoining Bonny Doon Vineyard is Sycamore Farms, a nursery in which hundreds of potted herb plants are available for sale. Stroll the rows beneath the shade screens and you might find more varieties of basil, sage and oregano than you thought existed.

At Tablas Creek, meanwhile, is a lovely flower garden, with enormous bushes of lavender, fragrant roses and an arbor dripping with wisteria and trumpet vines.

Inside, visitors step up to a slab of limestone on a wrought-iron base that serves as the tasting room counter, and take sips of exquisite wines like Esprit de Beaucastel 2000, a blend of mourvedre, syrah, grenache noir and counoise.

Does the name of the wine seem a bit odd for a California winery - not to mention the varietals used in the mix? The answers speak to the merit of the Paso Robles growing region.

Tablas Creek was established jointly by Jean-Pierre Perrin and Francois Perrin of Chateau de Beaucastel in France's Rhone Valley, and their American importer, Robert Haas. They searched throughout the West for an area that most closely approximated the growing conditions of the southern Rhone, and they chose these foothills west of

Paso Robles.

The soil is limestone clay. The terrain is hilly. The climate is sunny and hot, but with dramatic nighttime swings in temperature. (One day during our visit in mid-June, the daytime high was 97, the overnight low 52). The conditions tend to be stressful for the fruit, but that only means small berries that produce intense flavors and dark coloring. Rhone varietals - notably syrah - positively flourish in it.

Winemakers haven't just gravitated here from France. Other California regions have been buying vast amounts of Paso Robles grapes for years, then marketing the products as "Central Coast." But four years ago, prestigious Turley Wine Cellars of the Napa Valley bought Pesenti Winery in Templeton, just south of Paso Robles, and established a satellite winery here.

Owners Larry Turley and Ehren Jordan were attracted to Pesenti's 80-year-old zinfandel vines, and have been producing lush vintages ever since. The rows of grapes can be surveyed from the parking lot, the gnarled old vines as thick as peach tree trunks.

Turley is a heavy hitter in Napa, but it doesn't put on any airs down here. Its business card has splatters of red ink, as if someone carelessly dripped a wine glass over it. Its label includes a seismic graph of the 6.5 earthquake that shook up Paso Robles last December. And the winery's tasting list includes a 2002 Juvenile California Zinfandel - "We call it juvenile," said hostess Jo-Ella Bullock, "because the vines are younger ... as in 50 years old."

While Turley lies along a farm road south of town, most of Paso Robles' wineries string out along Highway 46, which bisects the region on an east-west course, and they draw the lion's share of visitors. The big wine players here - Meridian and J. Lohr - also get a lot of attention because of their name recognition. But it's fun to duck down one of the back roads to find a special treasure.

Some of the outlying operations have even banded together to market themselves as the Far Out Wineries, complete with a brochure and - this is important - detailed map. You'll have to wend your way along Niderer Road to find Pipestone, for example, or Adelaida Road to get to Tablas Creek. And don't miss the turn onto Chimney Rock Road for Justin.

Justin Baldwin, a San Francisco refugee, has drawn raves for a blend he calls Isosceles. Your high-school geometry will serve you well here - yes, it's a triangulation of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot, with the percentages of each changing from vintage to vintage.

"Justin is a classic example of the ripeness and roundness of Paso reds," said Ryan of Whole Foods.

It was probably fitting that our Paso Robles visit concluded with a stop at Mission San Miguel Arcangel, just a short drive north of town. Parts of it date to 1818, but today it is a sorry sight of crumbling walls and arches, overgrown cactus, weathered wooden gates ... and ghastly earthquake cracks in the walls, rendering it uninhabitable.

The padres were the first to plant a vineyard in this area. They probably knew nothing about Rhone Valley similarities or wide diurnal temperature swings or limestone content in the soil, but they certainly wowed the first de facto wine critic to pass through here. In 1848, traveler David Robinson remarked in his journal of the mission's "vineyard of

excellent grapes, from where were annually made considerable quantities of wine ..."

Sounds like the tasting rooms were hospitable in that day, too.

Eric Noland, (818) 713-3681

eric.noland(at)dailynews.com

CAPTION(S):

7 photos

Photo:

(1 -- 3 -- color) Paso Robles' small wineries keep things refreshingly simple, welcoming visitors to stroll beneath a grape arbor at Justin, above, explore the vineyard at Pipestone, above right, or say hello to Rebel Rose, the mascot at Dover Canyon, below right.

(4) At Justin Winery in the westernmost reaches of Paso Robles' wine country, signs point to competing wine makers - a reflection of the region's laid-back atmosphere.

(5 -- 7) With improved growing techniques, heat is no longer such an impediment to producing grapes around Paso Robles, as the rows of vines at Justin Winery attest, top. Visitors to the region may enjoy tastings, such as the zinfandel offered by Jo-Ella Bullock at Turley Wine Cellars, above left, or view landmarks such as the stone carillon at Mission San Miguel Arcangel, above right.

Eric Noland/Travel Editor

COPYRIGHT 2004 Daily News. This material is published under license from the publisher through the Gale Group, Farmington Hills, Michigan. All inquiries regarding rights should be directed to the Gale Group. For permission to reuse this article, contact [Copyright Clearance Center](#).

[Academic and Education](#) [Business](#) [Government](#) [Health](#) [Lifestyle and Personal Interest](#) [News](#)
[Sports and Leisure](#) [Technology and Science](#)

HighBeam™ Research, Inc. © Copyright 2007. All rights reserved.

www.highbeam.com