

Paso Robles stakes its claim as part of new wine country

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SOME people are saying Paso Robles is fast becoming the next Napa Valley. Since it's about three hours south of the Bay Area, Paso Robles is a great destination for a weekend getaway. You won't find the crowds or the traffic you will in Napa, but you will find fine wine, plenty of tasting rooms and lots to do.

We've made several trips to Paso Robles on "In Wine Country" shoots and are amazed each time by the transformation of cattle grazing land to vineyards. I used to be a news anchor near Paso Robles in the 1980s, when Paso was considered more of a cow town than a wine town. Back then the Mid-State Fair was Paso's biggest draw. Fortunately for us, Paso Robles has managed to hang on to its small-town charm while emerging as a force on the wine scene.

Paso is known for sizzling hot summers and cool nights. If you tend to wilt in the heat, spring is a great time to visit because temperatures are quite comfortable and the scenery is stunning. By July, almost all of the hills have turned a golden brown, but right now there are plenty of rolling green hills to enjoy.

Justin Winery is among the brightest stars in Paso Robles. Their Isosceles meritage is one of the most acclaimed Bordeaux blends in California. But owners Justin and Deborah Baldwin offer the full wine country experience with a restaurant, Deborah's Room, and a small inn tucked away among the vines, the Just Inn. With only three rooms, you'll feel as if you're staying in your own private wine country.

Another must stop along the Paso Robles wine trail is Eberle Winery. Gary Eberle is a pioneer on this wine scene. He co-founded the Paso Robles appellation in 1980 and is considered the Johnny Appleseed of syrah because he introduced the first 100 percent varietal planting of syrah grapes in California. Eberle was also the first winery on the Central Coast to put in underground caves, and with 17,000 square feet of underground tunnels, they remain among the biggest.

Despite his contribution to Paso wine country, Gary is about as laid-back as they come. When I visited Eberle, he challenged me to a game of bocce, wine glass in hand, claiming they play "strip-bocce" at Eberle. He was kidding, but Gary's fun-loving personality definitely sets the tone. In fact, it's

one of the few big wineries left that still pours wine without a tasting fee. Make sure to rub the nose of the bronze boar when you visit for good luck.

From wild boars to wild coyotes, another side of Paso Robles can be found at Wild Coyote Winery.

Wild Coyote is one of the newer wineries to make its appearance on the Paso Robles wine scene and it's unlike any other winery we've been to. It's styled after the adobe pueblos of New Mexico and even has a genuine teepee. It's all part of the vision of its owner and winemaker, Gianni Manucci.

Gianni is passionate about Native American culture and its connection with the earth. That passion is reflected in his winemaking style, but also in the winery itself. You'll find Native American artifacts alongside Gianni's stone sculptures in the tasting room, and if Gianni isn't pouring some of his zinfandel, syrah or merlot, he may well be out in the teepee playing his flute.

Gianni also recently opened a five-room, New Mexico-style retreat on site that's part bed-and-breakfast and part spiritual hideaway.

These are just a few of the wineries we've featured on "In Wine Country" but there are dozens more worth checking out. **In fact, Paso Robles offers a wealth of fun places to explore** including Windrose Farm, famous for organic heirloom tomatoes, Willow Creek Olive Ranch, makers of the acclaimed Pasolivo olive oil and gourmet restaurants such as Bistro Laurent and Villa Creek.

It's not Napa yet and that's part of the charm. **Paso Robles is definitely up and coming but it hasn't abandoned its small-town roots.** There's still a Mayberry-ish vibe to the town and you can't help but hope it stays that way. When you visit, leave your Gucci shoes at home and pack the Timberland boots instead; and if you go during the summer, don't miss the 4H livestock competition at the Mid-State Fair....