



California's Paso Robles region earns its stripes

From: [The Record \(Bergen County, NJ\)](#) Date: [October 11, 2007](#) Author: [ROBERT WHITLEY](#)

The Record

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10-11-2007

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Date: 10-11-2007, Thursday

Section: BETTER LIVING

Edition: All Editions

Column: WINE TALK

When Gary Eberle turned out his first wines at the Estrella River Winery in the early 1970s, he had big dreams for California's Paso Robles region.

Situated halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco in the heart of California's vast Central Coast, El Paso de Robles had everything an aspiring winemaker could want: enough daytime heat to ripen hearty grape varieties such as cabernet sauvignon, and cool evening temperatures to keep the acids lively and fresh.

Only 20 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, Paso is said to have California's greatest temperature swing from day to night. Eberle planted syrah, cabernet, merlot, chardonnay, muscat and a host of other grape vines as Estrella quickly grew to a half-million cases of production annually.

Those early vintages only cemented Eberle's belief in the potential for fine wine in the region. He helped establish the Paso Robles appellation in 1980 and eventually left Estrella (now the site of Meridian Vineyards) to open his own winery in 1983. But despite his early successes, Eberle still felt like the Lone Ranger. After 10 years there were fewer than 25 wineries in the area.

Today there are well over 200 and counting, a swelling of the winery ranks Eberle believes is long overdue.

"I always thought this area would take off," he said recently. "I just never dreamed it would take this long."

The conversation took place over barbecue at the spectacular new Vina Robles Winery visitor center on Highway 46 east of the Paso Robles town center and just down the road from Eberle's own place.

The Vina Robles Winery is one of the newcomers that helped propel the image of Paso Robles as a desirable wine appellation. Some that quickly come to mind are Tablas Creek, Treana and Robert Hall, but there are scores of others.

Much of the recent development was driven by a severe grape shortage in the 1990s coupled with relatively inexpensive vineyard land (compared with Napa and Sonoma), and some of it had to do with the widely held notion that Paso Robles seemed to be one of California's most hospitable environments for the so-called Rhone grape varieties — syrah, mourvedre, grenache, viognier, marsanne and roussanne.

Though Eberle was the first vintner to plant syrah in the region (and frequently dubbed the "father" of Paso Robles wine), he isn't convinced the future belongs entirely to the Rhone grape varieties.

"Everyone says Rhone, Rhone, Rhone ... syrah, syrah, syrah," said Eberle. "But I still say cabernet sauvignon is our best wine. I love to go against Napa Valley cabernets with my own. A Paso Robles cabernet is softer and more drinkable when it's young, and anyone who says they won't age simply doesn't know. I still have a few of my cabernets from the 1970s that are holding up just fine.

"And a Paso Robles cabernet is a fraction of the price!"

Eberle recently sat on a seminar panel that looked at Paso Robles Rhone blends versus traditional blends from France's Rhone Valley, in this case two wines from Chateauneuf-du-Pape. The French wines prevailed, albeit narrowly.

What pleased Eberle was a subsequent comparison between Paso Robles cabernets, a Napa Valley cabernet (Beaulieu Vineyards Georges de Latour Private Reserve) and a French Bordeaux (Pichon Baron). The favored wine among the seminar tasters (including my own score sheet) was the cabernet-based Treana from Paso Robles.

"I just loved that," said Eberle. "I was so proud of our Paso Robles cabernets in that tasting."

The only thing sweeter would have been to have had that experience twenty-some years ago.

Tasting notes

* Castello Banfi 2005 Rosso di Montalcino, Italy (\$22) — The trickle of vintners in Montalcino who've switched from the old style of Rosso to a modern, more serious expression of the region is now a river that's overflowing its banks. Rosso di Montalcino was once a cash cow, an interim wine meant to quaff with pasta while the more prestigious Brunello di Montalcino matured. The modern version, typified by this vintage from Banfi, exhibits structure and complexity that was once foreign to the Rosso model. The '05 is beautifully balanced, with soft tannins and bright acidity that perks up the finish. It shows more dark berry flavor than an old-fashioned Rosso. A terrific red wine you wouldn't hesitate to serve with a roast or a rich osso buco. Rating: 90.

* Joel Gott 2006 Chardonnay, Monterey (\$15) — I'm not sure why there is no mention on the label that this juicy, crisp chardonnay is unoaked, but it is further evidence that

fermentation and aging in stainless steel tanks can deliver interesting wine if the winemaker starts with exceptional grapes. Chardonnay has a proven affinity for the cool, often fog-shrouded climate of Monterey County. This wine offers a rich palate of flavors, from yellow citrus to pear, with crisp acidity and exceptional balance and length. For the money, one of the finest chardonnays I've tasted this year. Rating: 88.

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Keywords: ALCOHOL

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