



Above: Owner Debbie Thomas (right back) and chef Julie Simon (right front) relax with a customer at Thomas Hill Organics Wine Bar, in downtown Paso Robles. The region as a whole now boasts a number of wineries to visit, as well as a booming restaurant scene

# THE BIG EASY

Paso Robles is slow wine country. With so many tasting rooms and gourmet restaurants to visit, why hurry, asks **DEBORAH GROSSMAN**

**C**ruising along Vineyard Drive it's easy to see how this California region, and the town itself, got its name. Paso Robles translates as 'pass of the oaks'. Mile upon mile of these tall trees arch serenely over the road, pastoral farms and vineyards to either side. But keep your eyes ahead — gangly roadrunners, wild turkeys and skittish deer all inhabit the countryside; another reason to take it slowly.

Think of buzzwords related to wine regions around the world — sustainable, artisan, festival-friendly — and Paso Robles ticks them off. Farm to table? Paso serves it in style.

The good news for visitors is that the burgeoning scene of restaurants, tasting rooms and wine events will please urbane

and country palates alike. Add in a dash of cowboy culture, and Paso really is the complete package for a break in US wine country.

As a Californian appellation, Paso Robles occupies the largest physical area after the mammoth Central Coast AVA (American Viticultural Area). More than 200 wineries flank the east and west sides of Highway 101, the main artery linking San Francisco three hours' drive to the north and Los Angeles three hours to the

**'More than 200 wineries flank the east and west sides of Highway 101'**

south. The region's sheer size and diversity is another reason for taking your time.

## Wine country

One of the newest and most scenic wineries on the West Side is **Niner Wine Estates** on Highway 46 West. This working mini-winery hosts tours, and the tasting room looks out over a heart-shaped stand of oak trees. Try the alluring Fog Catcher red. Cooking and wine-pairing classes round out the experience.

Nearby, **Brian Benson Cellars** is a testament to the owner's combined love of winemaking and, er, classic cars. After working at his father's winery as a teen, Benson bought his own place aged 23. His interest in cars came from his father's other business: supplying vehicles for



movie sets. In his car-themed tasting room, try the pinstriped Kandy Red series or the S&M (Syrah-Mourvèdre). Call ahead for a tour of the working garage with custom cars from the 1950s and 1960s.

Located on a scenic side road off Highway 46, **L'Aventure** is the dream winery of Frenchman Stephan Asseo. Fed up with Bordeaux's strict rules against blending Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, Asseo blends both varieties into Optimus. **Four Vines Winery**, one of the fastest-growing in California, has inspired fans with its Zinfandels, such as The Maverick. Winemaker Christian Tietje's favourite creations are in his Freakshow line. The new, elegantly hip tasting room has huge, red, Chihuly-inspired glass chandeliers.

**Tablas Creek Vineyard** is located at the end of Vineyard Drive. There's good reason why the sign by the tasting room door reads: Domaine de Beaucastel, 9,009km. The winery is co-owned by Robert Haas, founder of importer Vineyard Brands, and the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape (for more on Tablas Creek, see page 34). While Paso was gaining fame for Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, Haas planted Rhône varieties in the limestone clay soils. 'We are a blend of what's new and what's old in winemaking, and a blend of the US and France. We came here because the soil is similar to Provence and the Southern Rhône,' says Haas. His red blend Esprit de Beaucastel is a great expression of this terroir.

A few miles further west, **Justin Vineyards & Winery** lures the oenophile back to Bordeaux. Known for what co-owner Justin Baldwin calls 'geeky wines', such as Isosceles, Justin also produces Rhône blends. The extensive tours showcase farming and winemaking techniques, the architectural winery and caves. For a quick tutorial on grape varieties and trellising methods, visit the educational mini-vineyard.

Venturing out to Highway 46 East, **Vina Robles** has it all in one package. Outside, sample this Swiss-owned winery's highly acclaimed Syrahs and Petite Sirahs on the patio; inside, the large tasting room blends ski-lodge comfort with a modern bar. Allow some time to look around the art gallery, too.

Also on the East Side is **Eberle Winery**. A pioneer of the region, Gary Eberle was the first to plant Syrah (see p30). He often greets guests himself in the redwood winery building or on the casual back deck. Eberle buys grapes from the nearby Steinbeck family vineyard, and helped the Steinbecks craft their first wines. Meanwhile,



Above: the view from the tasting patio of Niner Wine Estates to the Heart Hill oak trees



Above: petrolhead Brian Benson in his tasting room. He made his first wine at 12



Above: Four Vines Tasting Room with its decorative Chihuly-inspired chandeliers



Above: Hotel Cheval has stylish classic rooms with a contemporary edge

Cindy Steinbeck Newkirk and her family offer exceptional tours at **Steinbeck Vineyards & Winery**. Hop on a vintage jeep to the Wine Yard, an educational centre with 'crash courses' in a converted barn to learn about sustainable winegrowing and the history of Paso Robles.

## Eating & drinking

With Los Angeles only a drive away, many Hollywood-types settle here. Carole MacDonal, the executive in charge of production for the popular US reality show *The Biggest Loser* opened her dream restaurant in downtown Paso late last year.

**Il Cortile**, the courtyard, has Tuscan-gold walls, which, along with the open kitchen, create a warm ambience. MacDonal's chef-husband spent time in Italy perfecting his deft touch with pasta. Dishes include ravioli with asparagus and ricotta, a tasting plate of *burrata* (a cream-stuffed mozzarella), rack of lamb and *cannoli* (little pastry desserts).

Also downtown, **Thomas Hill Organics Market Bistro & Wine Bar** recently expanded to serving dinner. Using organic produce from the farm of owners Joe and Debbie Thomas, young French chef Julie Simon cooks up fresh, creative cuisine – salads (marinated beets, citrus, strawberries with miso vinaigrette and sesame brittle), dark-ale-braised local rabbit and brick-oven-baked pizzas. The expansive patio, informal decor and artwork all add to the relaxed setting.

While downtown, take your time sampling at some of the 16 tasting rooms. **Edward Sellers Vineyards & Wine** Blanc de Rhône is a lively white to sip while learning about the rocky soils. On Friday evenings, head to **Clayhouse** for single-vineyard reds, and stay for the small plates, wine flights and acoustic sets.

Wine bars are popping up all over downtown. **Meritage Wine Tasting Lounge** on 11th Street hosts tastings for 11 Central Coast wineries, plus there's food and gift shopping. Or head underground to **Level 4**, a 1920s speakeasy-style lounge-restaurant. Two spots where the winemakers and locals hang out are the casual **Kilt** bar and grill and the **Vinoteca Wine Bar**.

For a light pick-me-up cuppa in the morning or after a tasting, head over to the **Amsterdam Coffee House** in a ➤

## TRAVEL: PASO ROBLES

100-year-old building. The café is open throughout the day until 8pm, with espressos, burritos, paninis, scones and desserts galore.

Beyond downtown, two West Side wineries offer great food. Near Vineyard Drive at Highway 46 West, **Farmstand 46** pulls in the lunchtime crowd. Located right in front of Four Vines Winery, choose freshly prepared dishes, such as homemade chicken paté, seasonal salads

**‘Paso has the wine-country experience of other destinations, without the traffic’**

and flat-crust pizza, and consume heartily at the picnic tables.

At Justin, Paso’s westernmost winery, co-owner Deborah Baldwin has created **Deborah’s Room**. Dress up for the evening and treat your partner to dinner, soft jazz, elegant interiors and the intimacy of only five tables. Executive chef Will Torres’ tasting menus look the part, and are bursting with flavour. Pan-seared day-boat scallops with carrot risotto will set your tastebuds jumping. To finish, the not-too-sweet Justin

Deborah’s Delight, an orange Muscat and Viognier blend, pairs well with ricotta cheesecake and sorbets.

### Sleeping

A good base at the junction of Highways 46 West and 101, **La Bellasera** has everything under one roof – restaurant, bar, piano nook, outdoor patio with fireplace, pool, spa, fitness centre and even evening concerts. Or, when you visit Justin winery, across the garden from the tasting room is the boutique **Just Inn**. The theme of the elegant rooms ranges from the English countryside to Tuscany. Relax in the pool and spa after a walk around the winery’s hiking trails.

For those who stay at downtown’s **Hotel Cheval**, the tasting rooms, shops and restaurants are but a stroll away. Take a seat at the Pony Bar with its wide selection of Central Coast wines.

A blend of downtown buzz and back-roads casual, Paso Robles has the gourmet offerings and wine-country experience of other destinations, but without the traffic and cookie-cutter atmosphere. It’s a place to pause and enjoy a unique wine-country experience. Even if that means getting familiar with custom cars or taking a quick course in winegrowing in an old barn. **D**

*Deborah Grossman is a food and wine journalist based in the San Francisco Bay area*

## PASO ROBLES ADDRESS BOOK

### WINE COUNTRY

**L’Aventure** [www.aventurewine.com](http://www.aventurewine.com)  
**Brian Benson Cellars**  
[www.brianbensoncellars.com](http://www.brianbensoncellars.com)  
**Eberle Winery** [www.eberlewinery.com](http://www.eberlewinery.com)  
**Four Vines Winery** [www.fourvines.com](http://www.fourvines.com)  
**Justin** [www.justinwine.com](http://www.justinwine.com)  
**Niner Wine Estates**  
[www.ninerwine.com](http://www.ninerwine.com)  
**Steinbeck Vineyards & Winery**  
[www.steinbeckwines.com](http://www.steinbeckwines.com)  
**Tablas Creek Vineyard**  
[www.tablascreek.com](http://www.tablascreek.com)  
**Vina Robles** [www.vinarobles.com](http://www.vinarobles.com)

### EATING & DRINKING

**Amsterdam Coffee House**  
725 13th Street, Paso Robles  
**Clayhouse** [WWW.CLAYHOUSEWINES.COM](http://WWW.CLAYHOUSEWINES.COM)  
**Deborah’s Room at Justin**  
[www.justinwine.com](http://www.justinwine.com)  
**Edward Sellers Vineyards & Wine**  
[www.edwardsellers.com](http://www.edwardsellers.com)  
**Farmstand 46** [www.farmstand46.com](http://www.farmstand46.com)  
**Il Cortile** [www.ilcortileristorante.com](http://www.ilcortileristorante.com)

### Level 4 Restaurant and Lounge

[www.level4speakeasy.com](http://www.level4speakeasy.com)  
**Meritage Wine Tasting Lounge:**  
[www.meritagelounge.com](http://www.meritagelounge.com)  
**The Kilt** [www.thekiltpub.com](http://www.thekiltpub.com)  
**Thomas Hill Organics Market Bistro & Vinoteca Wine Bar**  
[www.vinotecawinebar.com](http://www.vinotecawinebar.com)  
**Wine Bar** [www.thomashillorganics.com](http://www.thomashillorganics.com)

### SLEEPING

**Hotel Cheval** [www.hotelcheval.com](http://www.hotelcheval.com)  
**Just Inn at Justin** [www.justinwine.com](http://www.justinwine.com)  
**La Bellasera Hotel & Suites**  
[www.labellasera.com](http://www.labellasera.com)

### GENERAL

**About Paso Robles wineries**  
[www.pasowine.com](http://www.pasowine.com)  
**About the Back Roads Wineries of Paso Robles** [www.backroadswineries.com](http://www.backroadswineries.com)  
**About Paso Robles downtown**  
[www.pasoroblesdowntown.org](http://www.pasoroblesdowntown.org)  
**About the Paso Robles area**  
[www.visitpaso.com](http://www.visitpaso.com)

## OUT AND ABOUT: ART, MUSIC, FESTIVALS, RIDING & MORE...

Near the beaches of the Central Coast, the closest major attraction is Hearst Castle, William Randolph Hearst’s country estate, with vistas, gardens, history, art and architecture. There are festivals throughout the year, an artists’ gallery in a former auto-parts shop, hot springs and countless sports-related activities.

**Hearst Castle** California State Parks’ historic house museum.  
[www.hearstcastle.org](http://www.hearstcastle.org)

### PASO ROBLES FESTIVALS

**Wine lovers** Zinfandel Festival in March; Wine Festival in May; Harvest Wine Weekend in October.

[www.pasowine.com](http://www.pasowine.com)

**Classical music lovers** Polish musician Ignacy Jan Paderewski bought ranches in Paso where he farmed and planted Zinfandel. The Paderewski Festival is in November. [www.paderewskifest.com](http://www.paderewskifest.com)

**Car lovers** Classic Car Weekend, September. [www.visitpaso.com](http://www.visitpaso.com)

**Americana lovers** California Mid-State Fair takes place over 12 days in late July. [www.midstatefair.com](http://www.midstatefair.com)

**Studios on the Park** Opened in 2009, artists work in open studios in a former auto-parts shop downtown. The artists’ work – painting, collage, sculpture, ceramics, jewellery – is available to buy.  
[www.studiosonthepark.org](http://www.studiosonthepark.org)

**Olive oil tasting** Visit WeOlive shop downtown, [www.weolive.com](http://www.weolive.com), and the Pasolivo olive oil farm on Vineyard Drive, [www.pasolivo.com](http://www.pasolivo.com)

**Thermal spas** Natural mineral springs attracted early settlers. Check out the spas, such as River Oaks Hot Springs Spa. [www.riveroakshotsprings.com](http://www.riveroakshotsprings.com)

**Agritourism** Several local farms, such as Hollyhock Farms, are open for tours. [www.hollyhock-farm.com](http://www.hollyhock-farm.com)

**Equestrian** Several derbies and the Miss Rodeo California Pageant are held in Paso Robles. Horse riding is available at venues such as Harris Stage Lines. [www.harrisstagelines.com](http://www.harrisstagelines.com)