

# Bloomberg

## The Buzziest California Wine Region Isn't Napa or Sonoma

With interesting products and a world-class terroir, Paso Robles is the state's new winemaking hot spot.



By [Elin McCoy](#)

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If you're on an all-out quest to make great cabernet, you might aim for Napa or Bordeaux.

Not Daniel Daou. After a decade-long global search for the right plot of land to start growing the grape, he found the ideal combo of soil and climate for his dream in Paso Robles, a land of oak-studded hills and winding back roads, a three-hour drive south of San Francisco. "Paso," he says, "has a climate between Pauillac in Bordeaux and Oakville in Napa. It was my destiny."



Daniel Daou at his vineyard. *Photographer: Daou Vineyards*

Once sleepy and overlooked, the region has new energy and a definite wow factor. It's California's shiny new wine hot spot, and not just for cabernet. It's where to go for top Rhone style wines, and tourism is booming.

Brothers George and Daniel Daou helped push Paso into the current spotlight with their wines and compelling story. After fleeing the bombs of the 1973 civil war in Lebanon with their family (one rocket hit their house and almost killed them), they ended up in France, where they grew up. The pair moved to California for college and later started a health-care network systems company. They eventually took it public, sold it and made a fortune while still in their 30s.

But Daniel really wanted to be a farmer, not a computer engineer, and when he tasted a 1986 Chateau Leoville Las Cases at an LA restaurant, he became convinced he was meant to be a winemaker. He made wine in his garage, and when the brothers had the money to buy a vineyard, they started hunting for the perfect terroir for Bordeaux grape varieties, looking in Argentina, Bordeaux, the Napa Valley and Oregon. Through Google and other research, they discovered Paso Robles had clay and limestone soil like Saint-Emilion in Bordeaux, as well as a maritime climate, just what he was looking for. He likes to say he's found "European soil" with altitude.

The duo wasn't the first to see Paso (as locals call it) as ideal cabernet land. In the 1970s, legendary Napa winemaker Andre Tschelistcheff advised Dr. Stanley Hoffman, who created the first modern commercial winery in Paso, to plant some in the hills of Adelaida District on a mountain 14 miles from the Pacific.

The Daou brothers bought much of Hoffman's ranch at the end of 2007, and started planting grapes and pumping out big, rich, high-end Bordeaux-style blends that rival some of Napa's best. They built an impressive tile-roofed Moorish castle-style winery with gardens, tasting patios with sweeping vistas and a restaurant at 2,200 feet. A current ambitious plan includes an underground wine cave, Michelin-level restaurant and luxury hotel suites for sibling brand and property Patrimony Estate.



Tablas Creek Vineyard. *Photographer: Tablas Creek Vineyard*

### **Wine tip: Paso isn't all cabernet**

The center of winemaking on California's Central Coast, Paso Robles (pronounced ROH-buhlz) now boasts more than 200 wineries parceled out across 11 subregions approved in 2014, all with different soils and rainfall, and elevations from 700 to 2400 feet.

Yes, the grape varieties are mostly red, with cabernet accounting for nearly 50%. The number of planted acres of cab is second only to Napa in California. The other 50% includes more than 60 grapes, even Italian Nebbiolo and Spanish tempranillo. Zinfandel has roots in the 19th century, and trailblazer Tablas Creek winery, founded by the American Haas family and the Perrin family of Chateauneuf-du-Pape, started popularizing Rhone grapes such as syrah in the 1990s.

But what makes the region special is greater day to night temperature swings (of 35F to 50F!) than any other appellation in California. This helps grapes ripen in a more balanced way and translates into bright, crisp wines. The warm daytime temperatures encourage sugar to develop in the grapes, while cold nights help them retain acidity and preserve aromas.

So far, the cool westside of the appellation (west of Highway 101), and especially Adelaida, Templeton Gap and Willow Creek districts have drawn the best producers. “The rocky limestone soils give minerality and freshness to the wines,” explains Daniel Daou, who loves to talk dirt. “The vines lick the water out of rocks.”

Winemaking is diverse and experimental, too. That creative freedom appealed to several French winemakers, such as Stephan Asseo of L’Aventure winery, whose family owned several chateaux in Bordeaux and who wanted to escape France’s strict regulations.

And vineyard land is still affordable. Top real estate broker Jenny Heinzen emailed, “Paso Robles delivers high quality in both real estate and wine at a more approachable price point. Up and coming winemakers add excitement and heavyweights like Daou are bringing international respect.” The best vineyards on Paso’s in-demand westside go for \$50,000 to \$120,000 an acre—about a third of the cost of land in Napa. And land is available.



The Booker Wines tasting room. *Photographer: Booker Wines*

## **The big players move in**

Last May, Duckhorn Portfolio, which became a publicly traded company in March 2021, acquired a ranch in Paso with 265 acres of top cabernet sauvignon. “To grow as a wine business, you can’t run out of wine,” explained Chief Executive Officer Alex Ryan when I interviewed him recently at Bloomberg. With these grapes they’re increasing production of Decoy, the moderately priced blend among their 10 brands, and they’ve also introduced an all-Paso cabernet, Postmark, widely available at \$25.

Giant E & J Gallo got in on the action last November, with the purchase of award-winning Denner Vineyards, an estate with 130 acres of vines known for complex Rhone and Bordeaux-style wines. In 2021, powerhouse Constellation Brands snapped up Booker Vineyard from founder and top winemaker Eric Jensen, who continues to make the wines.

But an exciting indie wine scene is also flourishing, with artisanal startups such as 13th and Third, a new brand from New Yorkers Julie and Gregg Rothberg that’s not yet available nationally. You’ll find a collection of 27 tiny producers, including two in my list below, at Tin City, a bustling warehouse district in the city of Paso Robles.

Now for my caveat emptors. Not every winery produces stellar wine. And remember that for vintage 2020, the heat and smoke from the August wildfires had an effect. Aim for the delicious 2019s and the promising 2021s from an idyllic cool growing season.

## Seven wines to try, from least to most expensive



Source: Vendors

### **2020 Field Recordings Fiction Red (\$19)**

Committed to organic grapes and non-interventionist winemaking, Field Recordings Winery is one of California's biggest pétillant-naturel producers. But I love their “taste-of-Paso” blend of 10 red grapes from 10 different vineyards. Its wild spicy cherry and licorice flavors go down easily with barbecue.

### **2021 Giornata Il Campo Rosso (\$22)**

Winemaker Brian Terrizzi is mad for Italian varieties. This juicy, crunchy, fruity-spicy bargain blend of sangiovese, aglianico and barbera, with aromas of dried oregano and cherries, is ideal with pasta from the Terrizzis' pasta company Etto Pastificio.

### **2019 Tablas Creek Esprit de Tablas Blanc (\$50)**

Tablas Creek's reds and whites just keep getting better. Paso's whites are underrated, and one of my favorites is this winery's signature white. Powerful and rich, it boasts tropical fruit flavors and a gorgeous silky texture.

## **2018 L'Aventure Optimus Paso Robles Red (\$65)**

French winemaker Stephan Asseo found the limestone soil, hillsides and cool ocean microclimate he'd been hunting in the westside's Willow Creek District. This intense cabernet sauvignon, syrah and petite sirah blend is a good introduction to his classy, restrained, mineral style.



*Source: Vendors*

## **2019 Booker Vineyard Oublie Red (\$75)**

This hearty red blend of grenache, mourvedre and syrah is especially food-friendly. Think lavender and pepper aromas and bright, lively fruit purity with a burst of freshness.

## **2019 Daou Soul of a Lion Cabernet Sauvignon (\$170)**

This cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and petit verdot blend is big, bold and powerful, with a bright, lifted character and plenty of spiciness.

## **2019 Patrimony Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (\$265)**

Ultra-sleek, complex and highly collectible, this red is Daou's idea of a Paso first growth and comes with a price tag to match. Made from the best vineyard blocks on Daou Mountain, it's the winery's—and maybe the region's—answer to Napa.