

SAVEUR

Wine Club

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Because Saveur celebrates the diversity of authentic cuisines, I try to select wines each month that come from different places and so reflect different styles and trends in today's truly global world of fine wine. The featured wines for June, however, both come from the same place and reflect a single theme. That's because I consider what's happening in that place with that theme so exciting that I want to share my excitement with the Saveur club members. The place is Paso Robles, California, and



the theme is the recent emergence of thrilling wines made there with Rhône grapes. Whether red or white, some of America's most exciting wines now hail from Paso, and I wanted to use this month's selections to give you a taste of them.

Paso Robles, located halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, used to be known primarily as a place to pass through on the way to somewhere else. No more. Today, especially for wine lovers, Paso is a destination all its own. Its emergence as a source of high quality wine is due to many things, including substantial investment and new-found ambition on the part of vintners, and the gift of an almost ideal climate from Mother Nature. The region experiences greater day-to-night temperature swings than anywhere else in California, so the vines don't get overheated even in midsummer.

Paso Robles wine country is quite large. The appellation covers more than 600,000 acres, stretching roughly 35 miles from east to west, and 25 miles south to north. As such, its boundaries make better political than grape-growing sense. (The northern border, for example, is simply a county line.) Within it, one finds a remarkable array of soil types and microclimates. As a result, Paso wineries produce a wide array of different wines. To my mind (and palate), though, most of the truly exciting ones come from grapes grown on the western side of the appellation. There a break in the coastal mountains allows a cool, sometimes downright cold ocean breeze to flow inland. There too, the soils are rich in limestone—a rare phenomenon in California. That combination of a relatively cool climate and mineral-rich soil proves perfect for Rhône grapes. Both red varieties such as syrah, mourvedre and grenache, and whites like viognier, rousanne and marsanne thrive in Paso Robles. These varieties are not as well-known in California as the Bordeaux and Burgundian ones, particularly cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, but the high quality of the wines being made with them suggests that will change—and change soon.

This month's white selection comes from Tablas Creek. A joint venture between the Perrin family from France and the American Hass family who long

have imported the Perrin wines (including Château Beaucastel), this winery is a clear leader in California when it comes to Rhône grape varieties. Virtually everything they make is very good, but I increasingly am impressed with their whites, wines that often outperform the French models. This Cotes de Tablas Blanc is a case in point. A Golden State version of a white Cotes-du-Rhône, it offers a surprising level of complexity, with impressive length and depth of flavor. It's a blend of five grapes—viognier (59%), marsanne (32%), grenache blanc (6% and rousanne (3%), and tastes simultaneously rich and refreshing. Not a wine for aging, it's something to enjoy this summer.

By contrast, the featured red this month is a wine that you can cellar if you wish. It's Austin Hope's syrah, one of the finest renditions of this varietal produced in the United States. Syrah, native to the northern Rhône valley in France, tends to produce rich, lush wines in California. They're often good but simple, the result I suspect of all the sunshine and heat that characterizes so many of the state's growing regions. The cool conditions on the west side of Paso Robles, however, allow the grapes to mature slowly, and the resulting wines to exhibit layered flavors that include more than just fruit. Much as in appellations such as Cote-Rotie and Hermitage in France, the top wines here enhance the taste of fruit with secondary notes echoing pepper, spice, bacon and more. This particular syrah has the stuffing to age gracefully for many years. If you choose to drink it in the near term, do give it the advantage of decanting. Exposure to air will allow it to open up and display subtleties and nuances that you might otherwise miss.

I'm increasingly convinced that Rhône grape varieties represent an exciting future for California vintners, and that Paso Robles is destined to be the epicenter of the emerging Rhône-style movement. I hope that tasting these two wines will convince you as well.

Until next month,

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PAUL LUKACS, *Wine Editor, SAVEUR Magazine*