

THE PASS OF THE OAKS

Paso Robles is a popular destination for everyone from wine lovers to betrothed couples

Writer Rob McGovern



Paso's quaint downtown where almost two dozen tasting rooms await and spend an afternoon tasting and talking to local experts to get a feel for what is on offer before heading into the hills to visit the wineries themselves.

DRIVE TO DISTRACTION

The best way to enjoy the region, both for its wine and beauty, is to take a leisurely drive to several wineries to sip and swirl some samples, taking a few of your favourite bottles with you to savour later. There is a convenient loop that starts and ends downtown offering a chance to see some scenery and visit several wineries.

Head west from downtown and around six miles down the winding, tree-lined Peachy Canyon Road you will come to Michael Gill Cellars. The small winery produces just 1,000 cases in full production, which is just how founder Michel Gill likes it so production can be controlled and quality maintained. Limestone-rich soil, hot days and cool nights are perfect for Syrah, Viognier, and Cunoise, but Zinfandel, Vermentino, Alicante Bouschet and Tempranillo are also produced. The proof, of course, is in both

the drinking and the awards, and Gill isn't afraid to put his wines up against anyone; rightly so if his haul of awards is anything to go by. The tasting room was inspired by French hunting lodges and the patio outside overlooks the vines, and is the perfect place for everything from an afternoon of vinous indulgence to a pastoral wedding ceremony.

Thirteen or so miles northwest is Justin Vineyards and Winery. Another winery dedicated to producing world-class Bordeaux-style blends, the first vineyard was planted in 1981. Eons of marine deposits have left this area rich in fossilised limestone which is perfect for the big, Bordeaux-style reds. In the pursuit of perfection, many wineries combine Old World tradition with modern technology.

At Justin, grapes are harvested by hand and aged in small French oak barrels, but to get the most excellent grapes, their winemakers invented the 'Air Knife' to ensure only the best make it to the next stage. Great wines and awards followed. Tasting tours and the Restaurant at Justin offers local food and, obviously, a good wine list with wines from around the world and rarities from the cellar. If you want to

LEFT: Justin Vineyards and Winery produces world-class Bordeaux-style blends and provides accommodation at Just Inn
BOTTOM: Paso Robles is known for producing quality wines thanks to warm days, marine breezes and a range of elevations and soil types.



Located equidistant from both San Francisco and Los Angeles on California's Central Coast, Paso Robles is well known to Californian (and to lesser extent American) wine lovers, but it is still a relative secret for international visitors thanks to the huge shadow cast by California's wine heavyweights Napa and Sonoma.

IN VINO VERITAS

An American Viticulture Area made up of over 600,000 acres that has been divided into 11 subregions, Paso Robles produces high-quality Bordeaux, Rhone and Italian varieties, among the 40 plus varieties grown in the region, thanks to warm days,

marine breezes and a range of elevations and soil types.

The Paso Robles Cab Collective is a group of winemakers that formed in 2012 with the belief that the best red Bordeaux varieties in the world are produced in Paso Robles. In a late 2016 issue of Robert Parker's *The Wine Advocate* (probably the world's most respected wine magazine), CAB Collective members were awarded dozens of scores well above 90 points for their Bordeaux-style wines, including 98 points and 96 points for DAOU Vineyards & Winery's 2013 Patrimony and 2013 Soul of a Lion, respectively.

With so many wineries and delicious wines to try, it is a good idea to head to



stay over, Justin has accommodation at the Just Inn. The three suites are walking distance from the tasting room and are decorated in a contemporary style.

Heading back towards town on the northern part of the loop on Adelaida Road you will come to Daou Vineyard and Winery. The 212-acre estate, collectively called Daou Mountain, is only a decade old, but sits on what used to be Hoffman Ranch Winery which is widely considered to be the originator of modern winemaking in the region when it opened in the 1960s.

The beautiful winery is a temple dedicated to Bordeaux with Cabernet Sauvignon being the main grape grown.

Located entirely in the Adelaida subregion of the Paso Robles AVA, the winery is serious business with the region's only automated optical sorter and a proprietary local yeast that was cultured from Daou Mountain after an incredible five-year process. Robert Parker rated all of Daou's current wines at 90 or above.

A few miles further down the road is Villicana Winery and while they undoubtedly have good wines, it is worth visiting for the associated craft distillery Re:Find Winery owners Alex and Monica Villicana wanted to essentially create a new product from what would otherwise be waste, in this case the free-run juice from



red wine grapes that is 'bled' to concentrate and enhance quality. By fermenting and then triple distilling the saignée, Re:Find was born.

The first craft distillery in Paso Robles, Re:Find currently produces vodka, gin, barrel-aged vodka, rye whiskey, bourbon and seasonal flavoured spirits such as limoncello, cucumber vodka and kumquat liqueur.

If you are just passing through Paso and don't have time for a full day touring around, consider a visit to Vina Robles Vineyards and Winery. The estate has six vineyards that surround Paso with each one having its own character thanks to unique combinations of elevation, soil and microclimate. At the heart of the winery is the hospitality centre a few miles east of downtown. The Mission-style complex is home to a tasting room where visitors can sample the latest releases or enjoy a food tasting experience. The winery also welcomes people to bring their own picnics to enjoy with their wines. An added bonus for visitors to Vina Robles is the amphitheatre, a 3,300-seat venue that brings all kinds to the region, from thrash metal band Slayer to Jay Leno.



The very drinkable estate wines are reasonably priced but even the estate's most expensive wine, the 2013 Suendero, a meritage wine (a Bordeaux-style wine that doesn't infringe on the French region's legally protected designation of origin), is less than US\$60 a bottle.

VINA ROBLES GUESTHOUSE

If, on the other hand, you do have time to stay, check out Vina Robles Guesthouse at Pleasant Valley. The spacious four-bedroom home has fantastic views of the surrounding wine country. The recently renovated property has a fully equipped kitchen, office and two patios making it perfect for families or groups. Guests also enjoy a complimentary wine tasting at the Vina Robles Hospitality Center.

www.vinarobles.com

OPPOSITE PAGE: Re:Find is the first craft distillery in Paso Robles. THIS PAGE: Fantastic views of wine country at Vina Robles, where each vineyard has its own character due to unique combinations of elevation, soil and microclimate





Allegretto Vineyard Resort is a Tuscan-style property which provides the perfect setting for a few glasses of wine

ALLEGRETTO VINEYARD RESORT

If you're looking for something a little less hands-on, take your haul of wine (and maybe something a little stronger from Re:Find) and head to Allegretto Vineyard Resort.

On the east side of town and close to a few golf courses, the regional airport and Vina Robles, Allegretto is set on 20 acres that, in keeping with the region, includes vines and olive trees. The Tuscan-style property has a large courtyard that is the perfect setting for a few glasses of the wine you will have undoubtedly picked

up along your travels. Alternatively, reserve a poolside cabana and enjoy a few with a plate of local produce from Cello Ristorante, the property's Mediterranean-inspired restaurant.

After a long day touring, dinner at Cello Ristorante is a good idea because the food served by Chef Eric Olsen is both innovative and superb, made with local ingredients, both farmed and foraged.

To really relax and unwind, Spa Allegretto offers everything from quick treatments to full-day packages.

www.allegrettovineyardresort.com





HOTEL CHEVAL

Elsewhere in Paso Robles, there is Hotel Cheval. Sitting just off Paso Robles' historic town square, the boutique hotel is as quirky as it is charming – the property has a dedicated S'mores Butler who makes complimentary S'mores by the fire every evening between dusk and 10pm. With just 16 tastefully decorated rooms and a stellar reputation, it is advisable to book well in advance. www.hotelcheval.com

Although Paso Robles is definitely wine country, there are other industries here, notably olive oil (the Daou brothers even produce their own oil from olives grown on property in a nod to their Lebanese heritage). For the full olive oil experience you could visit Pasolivio Ranch. Located between Michael Gill Cellars and Justin Winery, they offer free tastings and tours

of the olive press. There is also a tasting room downtown. The 'liquid gold' is even celebrated in Paso every June with the Paso Robles Olive festival.

COAST TO COAST

For those with a little more time, consider a day trip out of town. Paso Robles is just 30 miles from the California Coast and there are several towns worth your consideration. Morro Bay, a city of 10,000 that is just 10 square miles (half of which is water) has six beaches, a beautiful state park and one of the Nine Sisters, a chain of volcanic mountains. Another 20 miles down the coast is Avila Beach. A lovely little beach community, it is perfect for a picnic on the beach or just a stroll down the boardwalk. As small as it is, there are still half a dozen accommodation options, plenty of down-to-earth eateries, and of course, several wine tasting rooms. 🌿



Hotel Cheval is located near Paso Robles' historic town square, offering tastefully decorated rooms and boutique charm

