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## Paso Robles: Wine country with a rural feel

Janis Cooke Newman, Special to The Chronicle

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Here's what you have to ask yourself about Paso Robles. Why? Head north toward Napa or Sonoma, and in an hour and a half you'll be sampling a nice Pinot Noir. Head south toward Paso Robles, and in an hour and a half you'll be passing a garlic field and your first sip of wine will be another 90 minutes away.

Then again, if you've been to Paso Robles, you know that its open hills of vineyards and oak trees feel more rural than Napa or Sonoma. And that the people who make those heady wines are usually families, happy to show you how to cultivate a field using actual horsepower, or plant a feng shui vineyard. You know that even one night down there feels as if you've really been away.

Twenty-five years ago, Paso Robles was cowboy country. Now there are more than 200 wineries making some of the best wine in California, including Justin Vineyards' Isosceles, which Wine Spectator rated in the top 10 wines in the world. Still, in Paso, the vibe is more friendly than fancy. And the wine tasting more about people than product.

So now that you know why, here's how.

### The vintners

Gary Eberle is the Johnny Syrah-seed of Paso Robles. In the mid-1970s, he planted the first commercial Syrah in the state, and you can still find it at Eberle Winery, along with a T-shirt that says, "Up Shiraz." Time it right, and Eberle will barbecue you some duck sausage to go with that Syrah or one of his other full-bodied reds, which you can enjoy from the wraparound deck overlooking Eberle's vineyards.

Jeff Pipes of Pipestone Vineyards was the kind of kid who watched "The Farm Report." Now he plants his organic vineyard according to the principles of feng shui (thanks to wife, Florence, who grew up in Hong Kong), cultivates using a pair of horses and grows his grapes in "dirt that smells like dirt." At Pipestone, you're welcome to wander into the vineyard, check out the goats or just settle in at a picnic table with some wine and soak up the chi.

Justin Baldwin started out as an investment banker, but it's impossible to hold that against him once you've tried the wines at Justin Vineyards & Winery. If you want to understand why Justin's wines are so impressive, you have to visit the quirkily modern Isosceles Center for a tour -

guaranteed to turn you into an expert on maceration and tank agitation.

Robert Haas of Tablas Creek Vineyard is a patient man. In the late 1980s, he and the Perrin family (producers of Chateauneuf-du-Pape) decided to make wine exclusively from French vines. Vines that were required by the USDA to be quarantined for three years, before spending two more years in Tablas Creek's vine nursery. The tour here is more about the plants than the fermenting tanks - you even get to see how the guillotine-like grafting machine works.

### **Food and shelter**

Chef Chris Kobayashi is a perfectionist. Nothing leaves the exhibition kitchen of Artisan without him scrutinizing the mustard spaetzle or the ricotta gnocchi. Nearly everything served in this relaxed restaurant is local and organic - Niman Ranch beef, Cayucos abalone. And absolutely everything is, thanks to Kobayashi, perfect.

Debbie and Joseph Thomas originally rented the building that houses Thomas Hill Organics to give their customers someplace to pick up their CSA boxes. Now, if you find your way to their lime green and white restaurant (through the olive oil store), you can eat your Thomas Hill produce on a plate - and with things like Vietnamese barbecued pork belly and pan-seared diver scallops.

Debby Baldwin has turned Deborah's Room at Justin Winery into probably the most cozily romantic restaurant on Earth. But what you really want to focus on is the food, because even the hottest romance can't really compete with roasted pheasant breast bathed in porcini cream, and venison in a black truffle demi.

Justin Baldwin claims that he built the original Just Inn with a couple of Hells Angels. Still, there's nothing Sons of Anarchy-like about the place now - unless Hells Angels have taken up sleeping on Frette sheets. The four suites have marble bathrooms, wood-burning fireplaces and balconies with spectacular views of the vineyards.

### **If you go**

#### **Where to stay**

**Just Inn:** At Justin Winery, 11680 Chimney Rock Road. (805) 238-6932, [www.justinwine.com](http://www.justinwine.com). Rates start at \$375 per night and include a full breakfast.

**Hotel Cheval:** 1021 Pine St. (866) 522-6999, [www.hotelcheval.com](http://www.hotelcheval.com). The rooms at this lovely hotel in downtown Paso Robles have gas fireplaces, soaking tubs and impossibly comfortable beds. Rates begin at \$225 midweek, and include continental breakfast.

### **Dining**

**Artisan:** 1401 Park St. (805) 237-8084, [www.artisanpasorobles.com](http://www.artisanpasorobles.com). Chef Chris Kobayashi's perfect entrees run about \$25, appetizers about \$12. All the tables face either the big picture windows or the exhibition kitchen.

**Deborah's Room:** At Justin Winery, 11680 Chimney Rock Road. (805) 238-6932, [www.justinwine.com](http://www.justinwine.com). Five-course dinner \$90. Wine pairing (from the Justin cellar) is an additional \$45. Just go for all of it - you will not be disappointed.

**Thomas Hill Organics:** 1305 Park St. (you really do have to go through the olive oil store to get to the entrance). (805) 226-5888, [www.thomashillorganics.com](http://www.thomashillorganics.com). Lunch entrees average \$12. Dinner entrees average \$22. On warm days and evenings, you can sit outside in the lovely courtyard.

**Farmstand 46:** 3750 Highway 46 W., Templeton. (805) 239-3661, [www.farmstand46.com](http://www.farmstand46.com). Gourmet. Organic. And very cool-looking. This is the absolute best place to stop for lunch if you're tasting on the west side of Paso Robles (and maybe even if you're not). Get it to go, or eat outside at one of their silver cafe tables. Made-to-order sandwiches average \$9.

#### What to do

**Eberle Winery:** 3810 E. Highway 46. (805) 238-9607, [www.eberlewinery.com](http://www.eberlewinery.com). Open every day. Tasting is complimentary (as is the tri-tip and duck sausage if Gary Eberle is barbecuing), but it's worth springing the \$25 for the VIP tour, which will get you a private tasting in the cellar, along with a plate of artisan cheese.

**Pipestone Vineyards:** 2040 Niderer Road. (805) 227-6385, [www.pipestonevineyards.com](http://www.pipestonevineyards.com). Tasting room open Thursday-Monday.

**Justin Vineyards & Winery:** 11680 Chimney Rock Road. (805) 238-6932, [www.justinwine.com](http://www.justinwine.com). Open every day for tasting, tours by appointment. The basic (and very informative) winery tour is \$15 and includes tasting. More advanced tours (in blending, and with Justin's master sommelier) begin at \$30 and go as high as \$400 per person.

**Tablas Creek Vineyard:** 9339 Adelaida Road. (805) 237-1231, [www.tablascreek.com](http://www.tablascreek.com). The tasting room is open every day. Tours of the grapevine nursery (including the guillotine-like grafting machine) are at 10:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. Call ahead to reserve a place.

**Pasolivo Oil Olive:** 8530 Vineyard Drive. (805) 227-0186, [www.pasolivo.com](http://www.pasolivo.com). Because man and woman cannot live by wine-tasting alone. Open Thursday through Monday. According to the New York Times, Pasolivo's oils "are fervent in flavor." Find out what that means by visiting its tasting room. (Do not miss the olio nuovo, the Beaujolais nouveau of olive oils.)

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