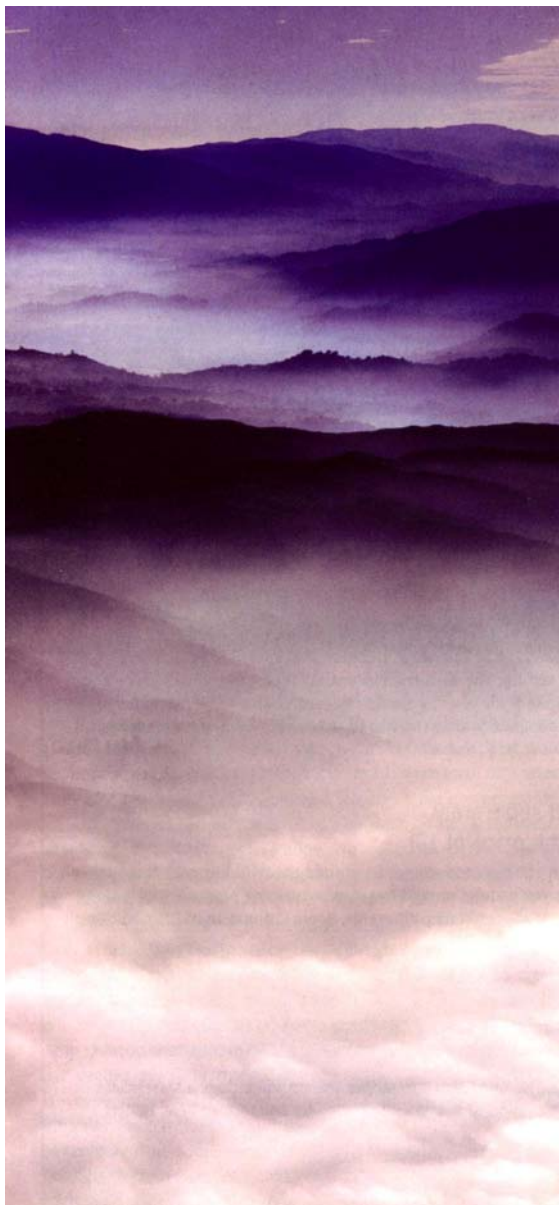


Rhône clone

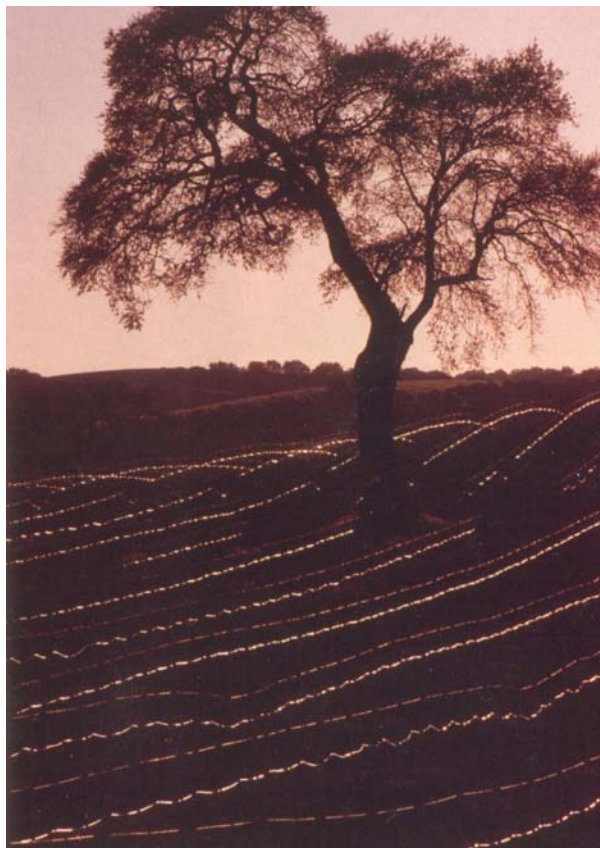
Paso Robles is California's Rhône Valley. The soil and climate are perfect for grapes such as Syrah, Mourvèdre and Viognier, and the region even holds a very popular Hospice du Rhône event every year. **STEPHEN BROOK** pays a visit

WALKING INTO THE fairgrounds at Paso Robles, I found myself confronted by 500 men and women in shorts and shades. These winemakers, importers, sommeliers and wine enthusiasts were gathering for the Hospice du Rhone, an annual festival celebrating Rhone varietals not just from California but from the whole world. There were seminars in the morning, gigantic tastings after lunch. At one seminar, Rolf Binder from Veritas in South Australia managed to sound both chippy and hungover; at another, Doug McCrea from WallaWalla memorably renamed Washington's Mount Rainier as Mount Rhonier. At the first lunch the theme was pink; crates of chilled rosé were stacked beneath fluttering pink parasols, and even the sorbet was pink. The event was run with a light touch. When, in the middle of one seminar, the lights went out and the air-conditioning unnecessarily whirred into action, moderator John Alban, better known for his

superb Rhone varietals than for his skills as an electrician, tried and failed to fix the problem. He announced: 'We paid for the building, so we want to use everything in it.' It's fitting that the Hospice is held in Paso Robles, as in recent years the region has shown its potential for producing outstanding Rhone-style wines. Gary Eberle made what he claimed was the first pure Syrah in California in 1978 from the Estrella River vineyards, which he had planted a few years earlier. The wine was fading when I tasted it some 25 years later, but was still enjoyable. The vineyard was later uprooted and Eberle turned his attention to Cabernet, which remains his favorite variety. The Paso Robles region is divided into two very distinct areas: Eastside and Westside, the dividing line being Highway 101, which runs from north to south. The Eastside is a plateau at around 370m, and it mostly produces easy-drinking whites and reds, made in large volumes at relatively low prices. The Westside is entirely different.



PASO ROBLES



Left: Early morning fog covers the vines of Paso Robles while, above, the sun glistens on a Paso Robles irrigation system.

‘In 1990, Syrah was planted. By the end of the decade, the region’s potential was realized.’

This is a hilly region, where the vineyards are planted on fairly steep slopes at up to 610m. Marine influence means that temperatures are more moderate than the Eastside, which can be scorching in summer, though both areas claim cool nights that give a long growing season. There is no rush to pick the grapes, as there is no rainfall or frost to worry about. But what singles out the Westside is its calcareous soils, which are very rare in California. In 1987, the Smith family planted some test blocks of Mourvèdre and Viognier for the Alban and Wild Horse wineries at their James Berry Vineyard on the Westside. In 1990, Syrah was added. During the mid-1990s, the wines made from these blocks began to attract attention and other growers, such as Justin, Adelaida and Tablas Creek, also started to plant Rhone varieties. At the same time, winemaker Mat Garretson founded the Viognier Guild, a precursor of the Hospice group. By the end of the decade the potential of the region was being realized.

Justin Smith of the James Berry Vineyard explains: These calcareous soils give the wines good acidity and tannin, which is much harder to obtain on the Eastside. I know of one Westside vineyard that has both limestone and alluvial soils, and the wines are very

different, the latter giving high pH and coarser tannins.’

It was precisely this soil characteristic that persuaded the Perrin brothers of Beaucastel in Chateauneuf-du-Pape that this was the best spot in California to plant Rhone varieties. This in itself is a powerful endorsement of Westside potential. Their partner in the venture was wine importer Robert Haas, whose son Jason now oversees the property. The Perrins brought in and planted French clones and selections, which for the most part were superior to plant material available from American nurseries. They also made wine, though initial releases were disappointing.

Jason Haas admits as much: ‘That’s because we made the wines as if the fruit were from the Rhone. We picked too early. Now we wait for full physiological ripeness, giving us the flavors we’re looking for. And of course the vines are older now.’

I wondered whether some varieties were performing better than others. ‘Not really, though we find this site a touch warm for Viognier, which we pick fairly early at 13.5-14.5% to retain acidity. When deciding when to pick, we watch the acidity, which slowly descends as ripeness increases. When it begins to drop sharply, that should be the ideal moment to pick, so long as the grapes are fully



PASO ROBLES



Paso Robles has borne witness to several newly planted vineyard in the last decade, mainly of Syrah grapes

ripe. This is especially marked with Viognier, much less so with Mourvèdre. But some varieties do better than we expected, such as Counoise, which has low alcohol, plenty of spice and soft tannins, and is far more intense here than in the Rhone. Also, Grenache Blanc here has much better acidity than in the Rhone, as long as yields are suitably low.'

The challenge here, as in other parts of California, is to achieve full ripeness without ending up with stonking alcohol levels. Syrahs and Viogniers with 16% are by no means uncommon here. Some are well balanced, so that the high alcohol is not evident; others are rasping and painful to drink. (I encountered one Syrah with 19.2%, vinified to dryness and completely undrinkable; the proud producer gave it a special label and priced it at \$75.)

Justin Smith, whose Saxum wines from the James Berry Vineyard are very high in alcohol (but undetectably so), explains: 'If you don't thin your crop, you still get high sugars, but the wine will be unbalanced and the alcohol will show. However, I pick at 22 hl/ha and that's why you don't detect the alcohol. Phenolic ripeness is essential, and if you pick too early here you have unripe tannins and sharp acidity.'

'The solution lies in the vineyard, with higher-density plantings and precisely timed irrigation to deter desiccation. I use computerized probes to monitor our soils and fine-tune our farming and irrigation practices.'

Hot fermentations are another solution, since the conversion of sugar into alcohol is lower at high temperatures. Another grower/winemaker, Paul Hoovers at Still Waters Vineyard, points out that many wineries buying from growers pick too late, often because their tanks are full and they can't cope with more grapes. 'When that happens the grapes shrivel and the sugars shoot up. You end up

with very high alcohol, and jammy or raisined flavors.'

Vineyard consultant Jeff Newton is not convinced that you can keep sugars down by fine-tuning in the field. 'We can tinker with irrigation and it may have a small effect in keeping sugar levels in check, but the difference isn't that significant. Everyone picks at high ripeness levels, as they should, but it's up to the winemakers to ensure their wines are balanced.'

Although there is a growing number of outstanding producers here, there are still too many poor wines on offer, the most common faults being excessive alcohol, baked flavors, oxidation, volatile acidity and brettanomyces. A New Zealand winemaker I encountered in Paso Robles told me: There are some shocking wines here. The

problem is there are still cowboy winemakers who don't know what they're doing in technical terms. Usually they're growers who have turned to winemaking because of the wine boom here. Often they don't realize their wines have bacterial or other problems, and even if they do, they don't know what to do about it. As a result, winemaking here is hit and miss.'

Fortunately, most of these poor

wines rarely stray out of the region. Far more significant is the fact that the best wines are of stunning quality. Justin Smith is that rare creature in California, an individual as gifted in the winery as in the vineyard. Matt Trevisan at Linne Calodo buys fruit from Smith and other Westside growers, and crafts brilliant blends in his cramped winery. 'I prefer blends, because the Rhone varieties have different flavors, textures, and finesse. It's not an accident that almost all the great wines of the southern Rhone are blends.'

Top wineries such as Saxum, Linne Calodo, Stephane Asseo's L'Aventure, Villa Creek and Garretson make wines in small quantities and they sell out fast. Other wineries, such as Justin and Tablas Creek, are more easily tracked down. Tablas' top wines, Esprit de

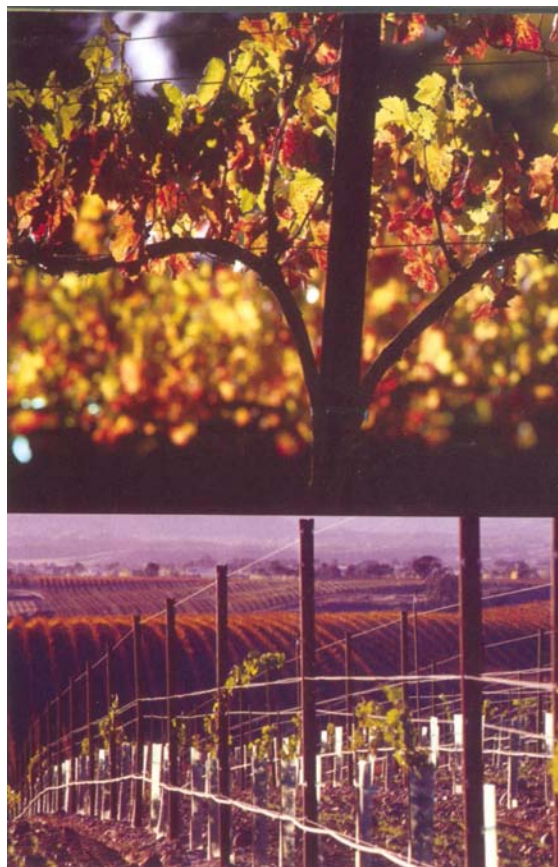
'The challenge here, as in other parts of California, is to achieve full ripeness without ending up with stonking alcohol levels. Wines of 16% are not uncommon'

PASO ROBLES

Beaucastel, are beautifully balanced blends, and at the winery tasting room you can find unusual varietal bottlings of Grenache Blanc, Counoise and Picpoul. Eberle's Syrahs, especially those from the Reid Vineyard, show that even on the less dramatic, higher cropped Eastside soils, it is possible to make rich, savory, eminently drinkable Syrahs.

As time goes by, it will be seen as no accident that the world's most boisterous celebration of Rhone varietals is held in California's Central Coast rather than the Barossa or the Rhone valley itself.

Stephen Brook is a contributing editor to Decanter and author of The Wines of California



RECOMMENDED RHONE RANGERS

L'AVENTURE ESTATE, SYRAH 2002

Opaque red; dense inky nose, ripe plums; rich, concentrated, dense, powerful tannins, spicy, assertive, fine potential. 2005-2012.

N/A UK; +1 805 227 1588

LIBBE CALDON, REMUSIS 2001

Dense minty nose, espresso; rich, sumptuous, full-bodied, chocolaty, splendid fruit, concentrated and tannic, sweet finish. 2004-2012.

N/A UK; +1 805 227 0797

SARUM, BONE ROCK 2002

Dense plummy nose, sumptuous fruit, excellent use of oak; rich, splendid ripe tannins, concentrated, lush, excellent balance, fine acidity, impeccable length. 2005-2015.

N/A UK; +1 805 227 4462

COPAIN, JAMES BERRY VINEYARD, ROUSSANNE 2003

Rich waxy floral nose; rich, creamy,

concentrated but not overblown, slight neutrality, modest acidity yet good length. Drink now.

N/A UK; +1 707 541 7474

EBERLE, STEINBECK, SYRAH 2002

Warm spicy nose, quite oaky; rich, firm, very light, concentrated, youthful, quite spicy, no blockbuster but has good acidity and length. 2004-2010.

£16.95 (1996); WIK

LIBBE CALDON, STICKS & STONES GREENACHE, MOURVEDRE, SYRAH 2001

Fresh zesty nose, plums, blackberries; rich, very ripe, powerful, sweetish fruit, concentrated, delicious though not completely dry, long tannic finish. 2004-2010.

N/A UK; +1 805 227 0797

SARUM, BONE ROCK, YOUNG SYRAH VINES 2002

Rich, elegant nose, lovely fruit,

very pure, medium bodied, not that much grip but quite rich, with fine fruit and good acidity and length. 2005-2008.

N/A UK; +1 805 227 4462

TABLAS CREEK, ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL, WHITE, ROUSSANNE-GRENACHE BLANC 2002

★★★★

Spicy nose, ripe lemons; rich, quite concentrated, sumptuous, spicy and quite complex, plump but not heavy; quite good length. 2004-2008.

TABLAS CREEK, ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL, RED, MOURVEDRE-SYRAH-GRENACHE 2002

★★★★

Reserved meaty nose; rich, full bodied, concentrated, powerful, spicy, chunky and compact. 2004-2010.

DOVER CANYON, FRALICH VINEYARD, VOLAGER 2002

Delightful floral nose; firm fruit, creamy texture, lush and full bodied

If a touch alcoholic. Drink now.

N/A UK; +1 805 227 0101

FOUR VINES, LOCK VINEYARD, SYRAH 2002

Dense rich nose; rich, chewy, bold, dense, huge but ripe tannins, good acidity, vigour and length, balsamic finish. 2005-2010.

N/A UK; +1 805 227 0865

GARRETTSON, THE GRAPES, HASTINGS RANCH, MOURVEDRE 2002

Sweet oaky leathery nose, a touch stewed; rich, juicy, plump, full-bodied, coffee and pepper, reasonable vigour. 2004-2008.

N/A UK; +1 805 229 2074

HAUSER RANCH, SYRAH 2002

Sweet, ripe, jammy nose; rich, happy, juicy, upfront, lush, quite good acidity and length. 2004-2008.

N/A UK; +1 805 226 9455

For full list of UK stockists, see page of main issue.