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## The new Rhône

**F**ROM the start, information about Tablas Creek Vineyard, the California project of the Perrins of Château de Beaucastel and importer Robert Haas, dribbled out in bits and pieces. But the winery has everything in place now and has been showing its entire line of wines. The whites and reds are equally impressive.

Based in Paso Robles, Tablas Creek was founded in 1994. The belief was that the hilly vineyard site had chalky, clay soils that were as close to Châteauneuf-du-Pape as can be found in California. The owners decided early on to import their vines from Beaucastel, and once all 13 Rhône varietals were established, it became obvious that Tablas Creek was doing things its own way, farming organically with hand hoeing and cover crops used for weed control.

The top red and white wines from the estate are named 'Esprit de Beaucastel' and the next level is the Cotes de Tablas red and white. Both red blends contain slightly more Mourvèdre than Syrah or Grenache. Another surprise is the high percentage (14%) of Counoise, an unknown variety here, in the winery's Esprit red.

The 2000 Esprit red is an exciting addition to the wine scene. Displaying red cherry and currant aromas, this red also reveals a touch of the leathery-animal side of Rhône wines that others are shying away from. One of the unfortunate trends is the New World move toward a fruitier, jammy style of red Rhône blends.

The whites are also atypical. The 2001 Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc is round, spicy and lively, with no oak in view. Containing 44% Roussanne, 22% Viognier, and roughly equal parts of Grenache Blanc and Marsanne, it was fermented by the native yeast. Fruitier and simpler in style, the 2002 Cotes de Tablas Blanc merges Viognier, Marsanne, Grenache Blanc with a splash of Roussanne. But the most exciting white is the Tablas Creek 2002 Roussanne, a rich, finely scented wine with wonderful flavours and balance.

Roussanne was pushed aside in favour of Viognier in California. At Tablas Creek, it appears to have emerged as the noble white Rhône grape. We can only hope once the word spreads that Roussanne will be given another look by other winemakers.

*Norm Roby is co-author of the best-selling New Connoisseur's Handbook of Californian Wine (Knopff).*