

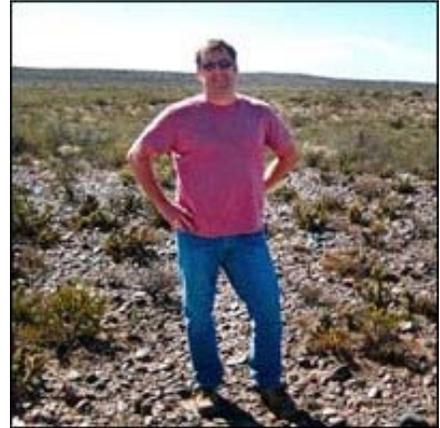
stirring the lees with james molesworth

A Rhône-Styled Transplant Grows Strong Roots in California

In town for the Hospices de Rhône, I visited Tablas Creek and tasted a lineup of 10 excellent reds and whites

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I visited [Tablas Creek](#) late last week while I was in the area for the annual Hospices du Rhône event in California's Paso Robles. Tablas Creek was a pioneer [when it started in 1989](#), planting Rhône varieties at a time when there were none in the area. As Paso Robles has grown into one of California's leading Rhône grape regions, Tablas Creek has grown as well. But despite being a high-profile joint venture (between



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the Perrin family, owners of the

the Perrin family, owners of the Rhône's famed [Château de Beaucastel](#) estate and the Haas family, owners of Beaucastel's American importer, Vineyard Brands), Tablas Creek hasn't been a splashy, sudden-rise-to-fame winery. Instead, it's grown steadily and quietly into one of the leading California Rhône producers.

Bob Haas, 83, is now in the third installment of a long career in the wine industry: He's gone from retailer to importer and now producer, working along with his son Jason, 36. The pair manages the winery, located down a winding road on the west side of Paso Robles, on wind-swept hills that bring a bracing, chilling breeze.

When I arrived at Tablas Creek, accompanied by Marc Perrin, the breeze was especially knifing. Neal Collins, the in-house winemaker, was talking with Jason about the frost they'd had the night before. Despite its warm reputation, the west side of Paso Robles has wide temperature swings from day to night, and in the early part of the growing season, frost is always a danger. Luckily it wasn't severe and damage was minimal at most. In the accompanying video, Jason Haas details one of the ways Tablas Creek works to prevent frost damage, collecting the cool air that pools at the bottom of the various hillsides and then dispersing it up into the air to gain a precious few degrees of warmth. It's one of the tricks the team at Tablas Creek has learned as they've adapted to the vagaries of the 120-acre property (approximately 100 acres of which are under vine).



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After purchasing the old alfalfa and cattle pasture for their vineyards, the Haas and Perrin families set about doing things as they had been done in the Rhône, and they were met with quite a bit of skepticism.

"We planted close [vine spacing] when no one planted close. We pruned shorter and we planted varieties no one was using. And everyone said we'd get frost every year, which we did," said Bob Haas with a chuckle. "No one thought we'd make it—but we did."

Those varieties—Syrah, Mourvèdre, Grenache, Counoise, Roussanne, Marsanne, Grenache Blanc and Viognier—were all new to the area. And the owners used cuttings brought over from the Rhône Valley to propagate for their new estate. That meant quarantine (to make sure the material was not virused) and a long and tedious process of propagating budwood and then grafting it over onto phylloxera-resistant rootstock. (Watch Bob Haas show the original vine material planted on the property, as well as the grafting procedure, in another of today's videos).

It took time as the vineyards were planted at various points through the '90s and early part of this decade, and there was a learning process as the vines matured and the Tablas Creek team figured out what worked and what didn't, both in the vineyard and the winery.

"Most people talk about temperature as the biggest difference between the west side and east side of Paso Robles," said Jason Haas. "But it's not as big a factor moving east/west as it is moving north/south. Really we found that soils and water were the biggest difference."

The property is located on a rare strip of limestone, similar to the Beaucastel property back in the Rhône, that lends needed acidity to the grapes as they ripen during the season. But while the soil has proven to be an ideal spot, temperature does play a role nonetheless.

"Over time, we found it was still a little too warm for Viognier and Marsanne to be on their own, though they do well in blends. But some things wound up outperforming our expectations—Grenache Blanc and Mourvèdre have done great," said Jason. "Basically it's cooler here than the Southern Rhône, but the growing season is longer. We're usually harvesting Mourvèdre into November, and that's really been beneficial for the grape, since it's such a late-ripening variety."

"We also started probably wrongly with double cordon, because that's what was done in California," said Bob. Today there's a gradual shift to more head-pruned vines at Tablas Creek, though Bob noted, "We do need a higher trellis than the typical bush vine to protect against frost." The result is a system of vineyard management that blends practices of both the Rhône and California.

"We modeled ourselves on Beaucastel in the beginning. That was the whole idea for the wines we wanted to make," said Bob. "But we had to adapt as we went along. We realized you couldn't just come in with California-only or Rhône-only methods since it was both a new area and new varieties."

The property initially began with all-American vine material, and early vintages made from those vines didn't live up to Haas' hopes. "They were lighter and softer," said Bob.

But those initial 6 acres are now down to two, and they're dwarfed in terms of percentage by the French material that has been propagated over the years for the rest of the property.

"The idea wasn't to plant all American material, but we did want to learn and check things as we went along. We always assumed the French material would be better," said Bob.

The learning process has taken place in the winery as well as the vineyards, as the initial plan of one red and one white wine has now expanded into a portfolio of more than a dozen offerings, most of which are sold directly from the winery.

"In general I think we made most of the right decisions up front—viticulture, and so on," said Jason. "But thinking we could just make one red and white each, from varieties that weren't really well-known at the time, was not the right guess. In the past five years though, there's been a big shift in consumer interest to Rhône varieties, luckily."

Today, Tablas produces an average of 16,000 cases a year, more in bigger years, though recent frost- and drought-affected years have seen less. There are now 25 acres of Mourvèdre, 16 acres of Grenache and 14 acres of Syrah leading the way, with numerous other varieties as well. And there's been additional experimentation as well—Tannat and Vermentino, two non-Rhône varieties, have also been planted. There are another 15 to 20 acres of leased land slated to be planted, and production could eventually top out at about 22,000 cases per year.

Collins has been a winemaker at Tablas Creek since 1998. Despite having no formal winemaking background, Collins had been in the area for 15 years before joining Tablas Creek, and that hands-on experience has proven to be a benefit.

"We felt confident at the time about what the vines needed and that we could handle that," said Jason. "But we needed someone with a strong connection to the area and we got exactly that with Neal."

Today, the Tablas Creek wines show better density and precision than in earlier years. They're not at all bombastic, nor are they overtly lean and minerally. They show a nice combination of the two ends of the spectrum, with supple textures, pure fruit, and long, fine-grained finishes. The reds in particular are developing a solid track record of ageability. After touring the vineyards, we tasted through verticals of the winery's top two wines. As the wines were not tasted blind and with winery representatives present, there are no scores.

For the Esprit de Beaucastel red, varieties are fermented separately and then assembled based on the quality of the various lots. The wine is aged in *foudre* (large neutral oak vessels) prior to bottling.

Reds

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2000 (35 percent Mourvèdre, 26 Syrah, 25 Grenache and 14 Counoise). The first vintage for this wine. Mesquite, dried cherry and incense aromas and flavors, with minerally sanguine notes that frame the finish. Nice dash of peppered *saucisson sec* on the finish. Drink now through 2011. *Note: There was no 2001 Esprit red due to a hard frost, particularly on the Mourvèdre.*

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2002 (57 percent Mourvèdre, 27 Syrah, 10 Grenache and 6 Counoise). This shows more ripeness, polish and drive, with black and blue fruits laced with sweet spice, tobacco and iron. Tannic but integrated. "2002 was not a great year for Grenache," said Jason, as it was a dry but not particularly warm year. Drink now through 2015.

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2003 (50 percent Mourvèdre, 27 Syrah, 16 Grenache, 7 Counoise). Nice sappy kirsch fruit with a vibrant, tangy edge. Lots of crushed red currant, Damson plum and dark cherry fruit too. Minerality is there but more buried as the fruit is still primal and bright. Fresh finish. Drink now through 2013.

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2004 (50 percent Mourvèdre, 27 Syrah, 17 Grenache, 6 Counoise) Very pure and racy, with Damson plum, cherry and loganberry fruit. Tangier than the 2003, with invigorating spice and mineral notes on the still-fleshy finish. Solid guts here. Drink now through 2015.

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2005 (44 percent Mourvèdre, 26 Grenache, 25 Syrah, 5 Counoise). Dark and winey, with blacker fruits—currant, cherry and blackberry—laced with mesquite and iron. Shows the Mourvèdre component more, with a loamy edge driving

through the finish. Still a touch tight too. Best from 2011 through 2016. 2005 was a wetter year, with cooler temps but an earlier spring, following three years of drought. "So the grapes spent forever on the vine, as budbreak was two weeks early and then we picked into November," said Jason

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2006 (45 percent Mourvèdre, 28 Grenache, 22 Syrah, 5 Counoise). Very juicy and pure with lovely kirsch and blackberry fruit laced with hints of shiso leaf, tobacco and incense. Dash of black tea on the polished, well-integrated finish. Very long, and approachable now, but should cellar well too. Drink now through 2016. "The Grenache has gotten better every year, which helps the flesh of the wine and gives a brighter tone," said Jason, of the increased Grenache content in the more recent blends.

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2007 (44 percent Mourvèdre, 29 Grenache, 21 Syrah, 6 Counoise). Tangy but well-packed with serious red currant, dark plum, fig and iron notes that are rounded and integrated, but still tightly drawn together. Serious grip. For me, clearly the best vintage yet. Best from 2011 through 2020. The start of another drought cycle of vintages here, according to Jason, but the wine shows better definition and depth versus earlier drought vintages. "We've learned to pull the juice off its skins before it's totally dry and then let it finish. There's no need to let it sit on the skins when it's already 13 alcohol, particularly with Grenache," said Bob.

Whites

For the Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc, 2001 was the first vintage and it has been made every year since. Varieties are fermented separately, with the Roussanne and Grenache Blanc aged in *foudre*; other varieties in *demi-muid* and stainless steel, prior to blending.

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc Paso Robles 2002 (70 percent Roussanne, 25 Grenache Blanc, 5 Viognier). Ripe and showy, with apricot, peach and tangerine notes. Still very bright, with a rounded, almond-tinged finish. Has a buttery streak, but not heavy. Drink now. "Because of the cool nights and limestone, we have really good acids," said Jason. "Yes, there's more sugar, but there's more acid, so with the richer varieties it works really well with the weight of the wine."

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc Paso Robles 2005 (70 percent Roussanne, 25 Grenache Blanc, 5 Picpoul). Racier, with quinine, lemon zest and honeysuckle notes up front, followed by hints of white peach, heather honey and blanched almond. Nice driven finish. Drink now through 2012. Just the second vintage since dropping Viognier from the blend and adding Picpoul, and it shows in the racy profile.

Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc Paso Robles 2007 (68 percent Roussanne, 22 Grenache Blanc, 10 Picpoul). Quite ripe and round, with apricot and clementine fruit caressed by salted butter and heather honey notes. Long, juicy finish has a nice combination of weight and precision. As with the red, this was also the best vintage of the vertical, and should age nicely. Drink now through 2014.

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For the original article, including video of Jason and Bob Haas, visit <http://www.winespectator.com/blogs/show/id/42588>