

TABLAS CREEK'S FRENCH ACCENT

**THE PASO ROBLES
WINERY SHARES
OWNERSHIP AND
INSPIRATION WITH
CHÂTEAUNEUF'S
BEAUCASTEL**

BY TIM FISH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS LESCHINSKY

Paso Robles is a world away from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, some 5,500 miles from the shores of the Pacific Ocean in Central California to the Southern Rhône in France. In 1989, the distance seemed even greater. At the time, Châteauneuf's star was rising, while Paso Robles was obscure, a region halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles that supplied grapes for large California producers. But similarities between the two regions in climate, terrain and, most importantly, soil composition, were about to come into focus in a way that would help change the future of winemaking in Paso.

Paso's Tablas Creek winery is today a stalwart of the California Rhône-style category of wines, based on Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and others. Its story really begins in 1971.

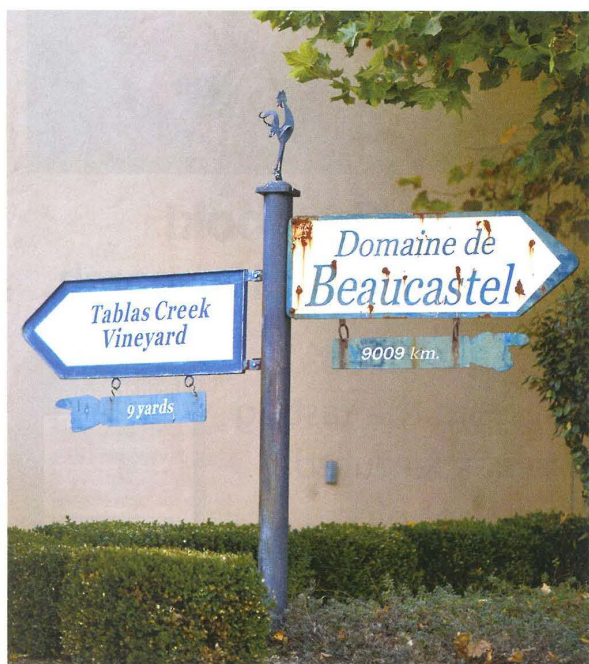
Jean-Pierre Perrin, the fifth generation of his family to run the iconic Châteauneuf-du-Pape estate of Beaucastel, his American importer Robert Haas and their wives had traveled to Napa Valley for the first time. Both men believed that Napa's climate, and California's in general, was better suited to Rhône grapes than to Cabernet Sauvignon. And with producers from Champagne and Bordeaux already involved in California wine, the friends concluded: "Why not a Rhône guy?"

For nearly 20 years Perrin and Haas searched for the right location, from the Sierra Foothills to Santa Barbara, with the goal of finding a site with the limestone bedrock and soils comparable to Beaucastel's. In 1989 they found it—west of Paso Robles at a former alfalfa farm and cattle ranch, where the hillsides were laced with chalk, a telltale sign of the limestone bedrock they sought. "Limestone to my mind is very important for the quality of the wine," Perrin asserts.

They named the project Tablas Creek, after a stream that runs through the property.

Adelaida Road snakes through the hills and gnarled oaks west of Paso Robles, passing few wineries along its path. As the road bends into an oxbow, and just beyond the intersection of Vineyard Drive, Tablas Creek comes into view. The winery, with its clay-tiled roof, looks like a Mediterranean villa.

The terrain and climate of Paso and Châteauneuf are much alike, although summer days in Paso are toastier, while nights are cooler thanks to the ocean 11 miles to the west. Ultimately, though, it's all about the limestone, something the best vineyards in Paso share with Châteauneuf.





Tablas Creek general manager Jason Haas was a teenager when his father, Robert Haas, and Jean-Pierre Perrin founded the Rhône-style wine estate.

Nearly 120 acres of estate vineyards rise and fall on rolling slopes surrounding the winery. Jason Haas, Tablas Creek general manager and son of the late Robert Haas, steers a UTV along bumpy vineyard paths, pointing out various plantings. “We were looking for a property that had a range of exposures and elevations,” Haas says.

Thirteen red and white Rhône varieties, all of them approved for blending into Châteauneuf-du-Pape, are grown here, from mainstays like Syrah to obscurities such as Picpoul Blanc and Vaccarès. There’s a certain novelty to growing so many eccentric grapes, but Tablas Creek puts the eclectic collection to distinctive and delicious use. Inspired by Beaucastel, the winery’s focus is on blends rather than specific varieties, with three tiers bottled at different price points.

The top red blend, Tablas Creek Esprit de Tablas Adelaida District, is dominated by Mourvèdre. The 2017 (\$60) is both refined and vivid with personality. The entry-level Tablas Creek Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles 2017 (\$25) blends Syrah with Grenache to make a lithe and expressive red, with elegantly layered raspberry, *garrigue* and pepper notes. The midpriced Tablas Creek Côtes de Tablas Blanc Adelaida District 2018 (\$35), mostly Viognier, strikes a lovely balance between fleshy apricot, melon and nectarine flavors, with a thread of saline minerality.

More than 20 other varieties are bottled in tiny amounts, from Roussanne and Clairette Blanche to non-Rhône grapes such as Vermentino and Pinot Noir. Mourvèdre and Grenache Blanc represent the largest plantings, with Grenache and Syrah just behind.

Significantly, Tablas Creek wines stand apart from the blockbuster style of many California Rhône. For Tablas, finesse trumps richness and power, and alcohol levels are typically 14.5% or lower. Above that, winemaker Neil Collins argues, “You lose the beauty of the *terroir*. You could be making wine anywhere.”

Quality begins in the vineyard, where Collins and viticulturist Jordan Lonborg intervene as little as possible while farming. The vineyard was certified organic in 2003 and biodynamic in 2017. Sheep and alpacas graze the property, helping reduce weeds and fertilize the vines. Donkeys guard the herd from predators. The vineyard even has a staff shepherd.



U.S. importer Robert Haas (right) and Rhône vintners Jean-Pierre (left) and François Perrin, shown here in 1985, scoured California *terroirs* before choosing Paso Robles.

The partnership’s original plan tilted to red varieties, but they were soon impressed by the quality of the whites. While Roussanne is a challenge to grow, Perrin says the Roussanne bottling best reflects the Tablas vineyards’ Beaucastel genetic heritage. “The influence is more difficult to detect in the reds,” he says, “although after five to 10 years of aging, it’s more evident.”

The winery relies on native yeast for fermentations. Little new French oak is used, and most wines are aged in 1,200-gallon *foudres*. Collins buys a dozen new barrels a year at most. “It’s all about this piece of land,” says Collins, who has been with Tablas since the early days. “We want to make wines that are reflections of this place.”

Selected Recent Releases From Tablas Creek

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SCORE	WINE	PRICE	CASES
93	Esprit de Tablas Adelaida District 2017	\$60	4,090
93	Esprit de Tablas Blanc Adelaida District 2017	\$60	2,250
91	Côtes de Tablas Blanc Adelaida District 2018	\$35	1,800
91	Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles 2017	\$25	3,580
90	Côtes de Tablas Adelaida District 2017	\$35	2,135
90	Dianthus Adelaida District 2018	\$30	1,500
90	Grenache Blanc Adelaida District 2018	\$30	1,470
90	Patelin de Tablas Blanc Paso Robles 2018	\$25	2,300
90	Picpoul Blanc Adelaida District 2018	\$30	440
90	Rosé Patelin de Tablas Paso Robles 2018	\$25	2,690
90	Vermentino Adelaida District 2018	\$27	1,140
90	Viognier Adelaida District 2018	\$35	430
90	Mourvèdre Adelaida District 2017	\$40	950



Tablas Creek estate vineyards

“Tablas Creek has brought so much to the Rhône movement in California. The spotlight that Beaucastel brought to our area has benefited all of us.”

—JOHN ALBAN

While Paso Robles had a long history of growing and making wine, there were only a handful of wineries in business in 1989. The appellation had only recently been approved, and Cabernet was the prominent grape. Except for early efforts by Gary Eberle and a few others, there were virtually no Rhône wines coming out of Paso. Yet very soon, just down the road, Justin Smith would plant Syrah in his family’s James Berry Vineyard, making way for his Saxum winery in the future, and John Alban would buy a ranch in nearby Arroyo Grande to plant Rhône grapes. It was a crucial era for the region.

A stumbling block for all California Rhône producers at the time was finding a good selection of rootstock and clones. “Very good Rhône material was impossible to find in American nurseries,” Perrin recalls. There were few Syrah clones and almost no Grenache. White grapes were even more scarce.

The Tablas Creek partnership went its own way, setting into motion a long-term plan to import cuttings of all 13 grapes approved for blending in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. “We were quite ambitious,” Perrin says.

It was a slow and complicated process, however. Each of the incoming vines went through a mandatory three-year quarantine, and the partners brought them over in stages to allow time to learn the vineyard. “We knew what we wanted to plant,” Haas said. “We just had to find the right place.” The first vines were available in 1992, and it wasn’t until 2019 that the final vine, an obscurity named Muscardin, was released from quarantine.

Meanwhile, Tablas Creek launched its own nursery business in 1994, at first building greenhouses near the winery to propagate the vines, then in 2006 shifting the operation north to Sonoma Valley, where partner nursery Novavine manages it. So far, more than 5 million cuttings have gone to vineyards in the United States.

Tablas Creek’s first vintage was 1997, debuting a red blend and a white blend. The winery facility was completed that same year. With the 2018 vintage, the winery produced 26 bottlings, totaling about 30,000 cases.

On my recent visit, Haas opened five older Esprit reds to show how they’re developing. I tasted through the lineup non-blind, starting with the Tablas

Creek Esprit de Tablas Adelaida District 2016, which remained bright and compelling (94 points). The Esprit de Tablas Paso Robles 2012 (92) was fleshy, elegant and lively with acidity; the Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2008 (89) was still rich and ripe, but showed a slight bite of alcohol on the finish; the Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2004 (93) revealed savory secondary characteristics of cedar and smoke, yet the texture was lovely and polished; and the Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles 2000 (91), though still showing youth and elegance, had developed appealing meaty and earthy secondary notes, which layered on personality.

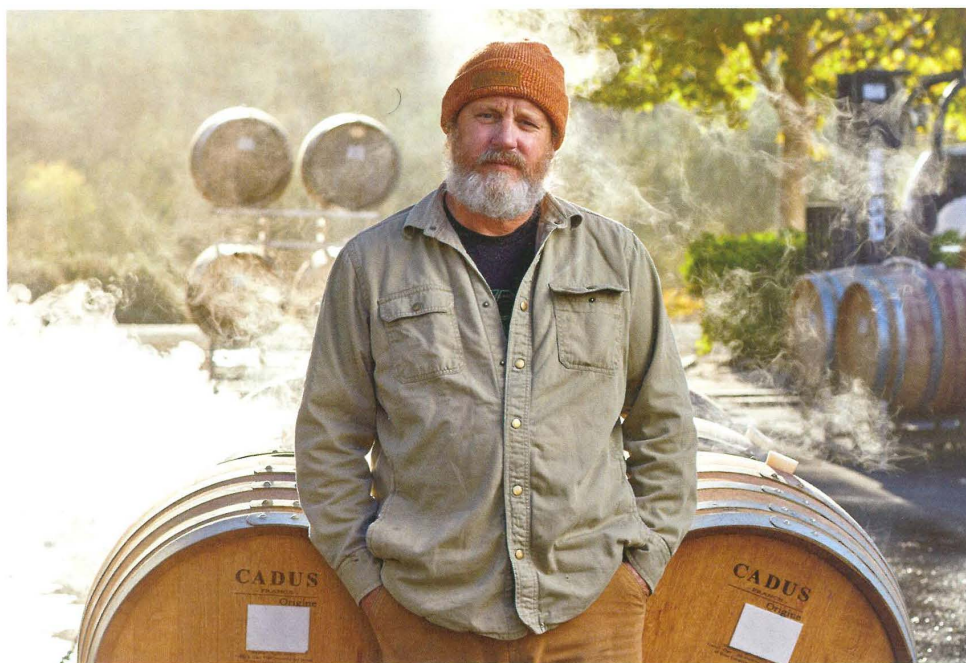
The past two years have been transitional for Tablas Creek. Robert Haas died in March 2018, a month before his 91st birthday. A Yale graduate and World War II veteran, the elder Haas had established Vineyard Brands importers in 1973, with Beaucastel as his primary client.

His son Jason, 16 when Tablas Creek was founded, grew up around wine and spent two summers working at Beaucastel. After graduating with a master’s degree in archaeology from Cornell, the younger Haas worked in the tech industry for several years before joining the winery in 2002. He became general manager in 2006.

As Tablas Creek moves forward, the model remains true to the original partnership: Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Beaucastel through the lens of California. “Having partners who have done this for generations is pretty grounding,” Haas says. As Collins puts it, “We’re standing on shoulders of others.”

With three decades in the rearview, the Haas and Perrin families have established a singular position in California wine with Tablas Creek. It is a true hybrid of New World and Old. “It’s a story about the friendship between Bob Haas and me,” Perrin explains.

“Tablas Creek has brought so much to the Rhône movement in California. The spotlight that Beaucastel brought to our area has benefited all of us,” says John Alban. “They could have gone anywhere and clearly went where they felt these varieties would do best: the Central Coast of California.” □



Winemaker Neil Collins, with Tablas since the late 1990s, prefers native yeast fermentations and large neutral casks for aging.