

DAOU Vineyards Helps Prove That Central Coast Wines Deserve Respect

The French-born owners of this Paso Robles property are trying to produce world-class cabernet sauvignon

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★★★★☆ 4 ratings



Andrew Chalk

DAOU Vineyards in Paso Robles.

This year we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the debut of the small Napa boutique winery on the world stage. This occurred at the now-legendary “**Judgment of Paris,**” in which a panel of French critics scored some small Napa wineries higher than the most prestigious Bordeaux wineries. It was a shot heard around the world.

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Napa has spent the past 40 years driving the result home, so to speak, with example after example of, above all, world-class cabernet-based wines. But what about other regions of California? Are they on a par with the Napa boutiques?

Certainly the celebrated [Ridge Vineyards Monte Bello](#) from the Santa Cruz Mountains, and [Peter Michael's Les Pavots](#) cabernet blend from Knights Valley in Sonoma. But what about journeyman Paso Robles? [Justin, with their Isosceles Reserve](#), qualifies in my book. But now there is a new kid on the block: [DAOU Vineyards](#).

DAOU was founded in 2007 by brothers Daniel and Georges Daou. Growing up in France, the two wanted to be part of the entrepreneurial revolution. They took off to college in California and, armed with computer engineering and electrical engineering degrees and a lot of drive, went to work in Silicon Valley – from which they retired, in their 30s, multimillionaires from their own software company. That gave them the opportunity to pursue their dream and create a winery.

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Daniel, the winemaker, revered **cabernet sauvignon**. He wanted to create one as good as any in the world. The brothers looked at vineyard land in **Napa, Sonoma**, Southern California, **Spain's Ribera del Duero**, and **Argentina's Mendoza region**. Eventually, they found their way to California's central coast, where they discovered a gem with historic pedigree. Hoffman Mountain Ranch (HMR) was a **famous Paso Robles property** in the Santa Lucia Mountains planted by Dr. Stanley Hoffman with the assistance of André Tchelistcheff in 1964. The grapes made award-winning wine for HMR Winery and others (**Adelaida Wine Cellars** among them). The Daou brothers bought it in 2012.

The property spans more than 212 acres total, 100 of it farmable grape acreage. It was noteworthy on account of its unbroken calcareous (chalk) soil, on a par with that of **the Médoc region in Bordeaux**, and for its altitude. At 2,200 feet it was one of the highest vineyards in Paso Robles. The soil provided good drainage. The altitude meant, most importantly, cool nights that allowed the grapes a long growing season to obtain full phenolic ripeness before the hot days elevated the sugars to ripeness levels. (Phenolics are the immense range of chemical compounds, acidic and otherwise, that affect the flavor, aroma, texture, and color of wine.) On a recent visit to the estate vineyard, the temperature was 84 degrees F at a time that it was 103 degrees F down in the town of Paso Robles. The land's proximity to the Templeton Gap meant cooling breezes from the ocean that dried out vines when they were damp, and the exposure to the sun, southeast and southwest, meant good ripening.

Notwithstanding the viticultural strengths of property, it also happens to be a candidate for one of the top 10 most beautiful vineyard vistas in the world. At the highest point of the estate, the brothers built a tasting room and winery in the Spanish colonial style. From the patio, or through the floor-to-ceiling windows, one looks down valleys that appear to be folded quilts on a human scale. The verdant vines project a bright lush green and the linear row planting displays a symmetry that resembles complex textures when viewed from hundreds of yards away.

Does Daniel expect the character of world-class cabernet from Paso Robles to be identical to that of **Bordeaux** or Napa? As he puts it, "Neither." Here's his explanation:

"Bordeaux does not ripen often. When you taste a Bordeaux wine, you are tasting 80 percent soil and 20 percent climate. California cabernet usually lacks some minerality because the soils are predominantly clay and loam, so when you are tasting a California cabernet, you are tasting 80 percent climate and 20 percent soil. On our mountain we have the soils of Bordeaux and the climate of Prichard Hill in Napa, so you are tasting 50 percent soil and 50 percent climate. I am seeking to make a unique cabernet that would be closest to a warmer vintage in Bordeaux like 1982, 1990, 2000."

Daniel also shares my excitement about the potential for **cabernet franc** establishing itself as a first-class variety in California.

DAOU is uncompromising. Trellised grapes grow to just four feet high. It gives enough photosynthesis to ripen the grapes, better terrestrial radiation to achieve earlier ripening, and better phenolics. Vineyards are planted to between 2,234 and 2,480 vines per acre. Each vine carries only half the number of clusters that are commonly found, in order to channel the plant's energy into fewer grapes. The other grapes are "dropped" into the soil. DAOU avoids deficit irrigation as a rule, and dry farms. Only if the vine is so dry that it is in danger of shutting down is drip irrigation activated. Clonal selection gets the same close attention. Daniel worked with the international enological consulting firm Enartis to isolate 100 different yeast cells that were wild in the vineyards and narrow them down to a single ideal choice.

All DAOU's estate vineyards are picked and sorted by hand, with the assistance of a Pellenc optical sorter (**at the time of my visit, the only one is Paso Robles**). The harvest generally involves just one pass, because fruit has been dropped as many as five times prior to harvest, balancing ripening. No press wine is added to the estate product. As Daniel sees it, "For our fruit, press wine is out of balance and inferior" — because the phenolics in the grapes are too high.

He hates acidified wines. “They mask the terroir,” he says. To the winemaker who asks why he doesn’t add acid, he would say that there are ways to manage a vineyard to prevent pH rising too much. Earlier picking is one approach. Producing the wrong acidity in the fruit, thinking, “Oh, I’ll adjust it in the winery,” Daniel says, is just laziness.

I inquired whether he thinks California cabernets are over-extracted. “I don’t fully concur with the term ‘over-extracted,’” he replies. “I would rather use the term ‘out of balance.’ Is there such a thing as too much color for a cabernet? I don’t think so. But is there such a thing as too many tannins? Absolutely. So the key is to extract the right thing. Too many wines are out of balance. That’s why I measure phenolics daily in my fermentations. I want to be 100 percent accurate in making a balanced wine.”

The DAOU wines are aged in 100 percent French oak barrels, some of which Daniel designed. His thinking about oak is, “I do not want to taste wood in my wines. I want to taste the effects of the oak without tasting the char. Most toasts are too heavy for my liking.” He points out one barrel. “This one is roasted at lower temperature for about four hours,” he says. He prefers fine-grained oak. “The oak program is based on phenolics,” he continues. “If a wine has very high phenolics, it can handle more oak. It’s about balance. Our wines can easily handle 100 percent new French oak and I only use extra fine grain which takes years to release. Oak adds many complex flavors to the wine. The key is to make sure the oak does not take over and suppress the terroir. That’s why I use only the finest grain and a custom toast or lower toasts to make sure it does not.”

DAOU makes about a dozen wines using Rhône, Bordeaux, and Burgundy varieties, all grown in Paso Robles. Pricing is in three progressive tiers according to grape source. The Paso Robles Collection wines come from purchased grapes, the Reserve Collection from a blend of purchased and estate grapes, and the Estate Collection entirely from estate-grown fruit. It is the three wines in the latter tier that will cement DAOU's reputation.

2013 DAOU Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (\$85)

I taste dense, dark fruit, and a mouthfeel of stout, grippy tannins and distinct acids. The wine spent 20 months in 80 percent new French oak. Daniel considers that it will need 10 years to show its best. He considers it like a Bordeaux from a warmer year (1982, for instance), but it shows no jaminess.

2012 DAOU Estate Mayote (\$100)

A blend of **syrah** (45 percent), cabernet sauvignon (43 percent), and petit verdot (12 percent). Daniel is at peace blending syrah with Bordeaux varieties. Animal flavors from the syrah make this a perfect wine for lamb dishes. The extra year of age over the other current estate releases has “an exponential effect on softness,” Daniel says.

2013 DAOU Estate Soul of a Lion (\$150)

The estate’s signature wine, mostly cabernet sauvignon (82 percent) with 10 percent cabernet franc and 8 percent petit verdot. Drawn from the best vineyard blocks and aged in 100 percent new French oak for 22 months, the wine’s massiveness reminds me of **the wines of Harlan Estate**. I tell Daniel that I think the cabernets contribute pyrazines (savory flavors or aromas often perceived as vegetal) to the nose, but he says that lab analysis doesn’t show high pyrazines. He thinks it may be classic cabernet herbal character. On further tasting, a floral nose, a more feminine side, shows itself. Daniel attributes this to the influence of his fine-grain custom barrels.

The Estate Collection reminds me of a horizontal tasting of the finest Napa boutiques. I cannot help but think that DAOU has been passed over by some major wine publications, which tend to give its wines scores in the lower 90s. If those Napa boutiques deserve 98+, then so does DAOU. It takes a little effort to get Daniel to comment on this underscoring, but eventually he concedes, “Often I feel that we don’t get the scores we deserve because we are not from a certain region they give a bigger score to. But I am confident we will in time.” Amen to that.