

What's Past Is Prologue

In 2014, vintners in Paso Robles subdivided their large region into smaller bites, creating 11 American Viticultural Areas. It has been difficult to know what to make of these partitions. Praise them as a bold vision for the future? Dismiss them as a recipe for confusion? Conclude that they could be both?

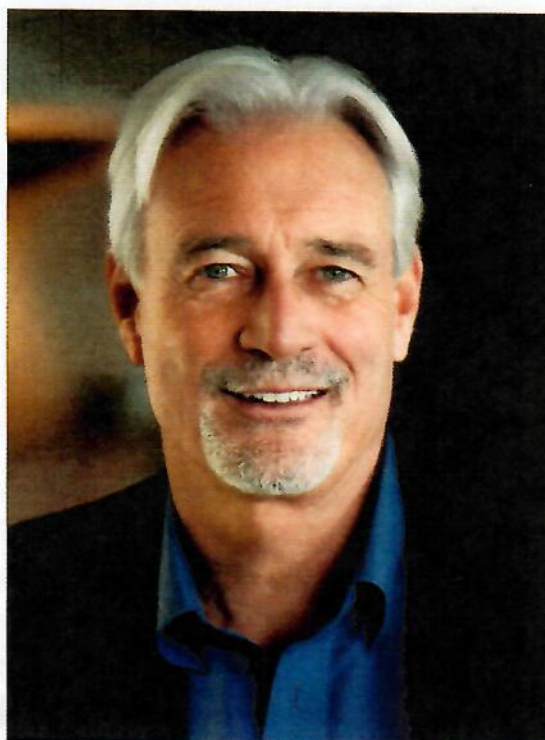
None of the AVAs are well-known. Some of them, such as Templeton Gap, ring distant bells but no hard wine connections. The success of each new AVA will depend, of course, on the quality of its wines, but no one can say how these divisions will impact the region as a whole. For now, the best we can do is look to the past as a guide to the future.

Paso is the midway point between San Francisco and Los Angeles. With its vast acreage, it serves many masters. It is admired for its robust Zinfandels and savory Cabernets, along with its Rhône-style reds, in which Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre commingle in idiosyncratic blends. Given the license of creativity in this category, basically anything goes.

The Adelaida District is recognized for exceptional Cabernet. One prominent estate is Daou Vineyards, which farms more than 100 acres of grapes, much of it directed toward Bordeaux-inspired cuvées. After tasting Daou's new reds I am more convinced than ever of the winery's commitment to quality as well as the region's potential to elevate Cabernet to even greater success.

West of Paso proper, the Adelaida District is a mountain ridge that divides the warmer areas inland from the cooler reaches toward the coast. A helicopter tour of the region makes the east-west divide easy to see. Highway 101 splits the two. Titans such as Gallo roam to the east, where the land is flatter, warmer and easier to farm. The west side is defined by rugged, forested mountains and narrow crevices lined by limestone. It is home to boutique producers such as Saxum, Booker and Epoch.

While airborne, my pilot hovered above the area's most famous landmark, Hearst Castle, a short distance from the Pacific. He followed the coastline south, where, to my surprise, there were



The future of Paso Robles is up for grabs now that vintners have subdivided their large region into 11 smaller AVAs.

many small patches of Pinot Noir growing. None of these vineyards fall within any of the AVAs, opening the door for yet another appellation. The thought that Pinot Noir might be among Paso's rising stars reminded me of my signature wine experience from Paso, the Hoffman Mountain Ranch Pinot Noir, vintage 1976.

HMR's winemaker, the legendary André Tchelistcheff, often poured it at his home in Napa. He was passionate about his favorite wine and spellbound by the property and the ambition of its owner. After trading 12 acres in Beverly Hills for 2,000 in Adelaida, Dr. Stanley Hoffman, a retired cardiologist, lured Tchelistcheff to Paso with the chance to pursue viticulture in what amounted to the Wild West.

"Now look, doctor, that's a beautiful dream," Tchelistcheff recalled telling Hoffman in an interview in 1979, "but it's a gamble." Nobody knew what grapes would succeed, but Hoffman was determined and the two proceeded to experiment, with the most charming wine being their mountain-grown

Pinot Noir, from vineyards now owned by Daou.

Pinot, however, isn't part of Daou's strategy. Though pleased by their property's historic ties to Hoffman and Tchelistcheff, brothers Georges and Daniel Daou have their sights set on Cabernet, and truth be told the Daou Cabernets are exquisite. Offering stylistic diversity, at a range of price points, they should appeal to both novices and cognoscenti. Estate-grown fruit, from vineyards reaching elevations of 2,200 feet, anchor the wines, with stylish, extra-toasty oak also evident in each bottling.

Over the past few vintages, the wines have become a shade fuller and more intense, yet with greater nuance. My favorites are the 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon Adelaida District Estate (94 points, \$85), showing finesse and refinement, with rich, deep flavors; the 2014 Soul of a Lion (93, \$125), built for the long haul; and the 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles (93, \$28), a sleek, richly flavored beauty that is caressing and layered. The 2016 has just been released.

Cabernet and Rhône reds have clearly made their mark in Paso. Will Pinot be next? The history of HMR tells us it's possible, and the story of this exciting region is still being written.

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