

## PASO ROBLES' WESTSIDE BIDS FOR WINE GREATNESS

by Rich Mauro

Visiting with winemakers and winery owners in Paso Robles' Westside, I got a clear sense of how special they all believe the area is for winegrape growing. I heard a lot about the calcareous soils (think calcium carbonate, limestone or chalk) of the area and the significance of this rocky, relatively infertile type of soil to the exciting quality of the wines on the Westside. Basically, poor soil leads to stress on the vines that lowers yields, producing more intensely flavored fruit. Calcareous soils, in particular, contribute intense bouquets, firm acids and strong alcohol but with finesse.

I also heard a lot about climate during the growing season, specifically the hot days and cool nights. The Westside commonly has temperature swings of 50-55 degrees day-to-night, largely due to cooling breezes from Pacific Ocean. Vintners everywhere know these are prime conditions to encourage ripening with balance of sugar and acid.

The other special feature everyone emphasized was the topography. Dominated by the Santa Lucia Mountains, it is quite a beautiful and amazingly varied area with flatlands, river bottoms, benchlands, hills and mountains. There are multiple microclimates and diverse vineyard sites ranging from 800-2000 feet above sea level.

The Templeton Gap area southwest of the town of Paso Robles is a perfect example of all three characteristics. An opening in the mountain range, it straddles Highway 46W, which is dotted with wineries and tasting rooms, making it an ideal route for touring. It is also home to two of the most passionate (and youngest) winemaker-advocates I visited.

Treana/Austin Hope/Liberty School: Austin Hope's family began planting vineyards in the Templeton Gap in 1978 and for many years sold the bounty to others, especially Caymus for their Liberty School label. Now the Hopes own the label, a best buy.

The Treana label was established in 1996. The Treana Red is a complex blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah that has emerged as a trendsetter for the area. The Treana White combines viognier and marsanne from the Mer Soleil Vineyard in Monterey into a refined, fruit filled wine.

Austin Hope believes syrah is the future of Paso Robles and established his own label in 2002 primarily to showcase the grape. He also makes a Rousanne Mer Soleil Vineyard and a blend of mourvèdre, syrah and grenache called Westside Red that bursts with red berry fruit and sure goes down easy.

Linne Calodo: In 1998, after several

years with local wineries, Matt Trevisan co-founded this winery named after the technical term for that limestone soil. During my visit, Matt talked enthusiastically of his commitment to natural approaches, including sustainable growing practices and relying on blending to create balance and complexity, instead of modern techniques to manipulate the wines.

This definitely showed in the two whites – 2004 The Contrarian (mostly roussanne with some viognier) and 2004 The Disciple (mostly viognier with some roussanne) were amazingly aromatic, with juicy fruit and an intriguing minerality. The reds were even more impressive, showing great depth and complexity, yet with remarkable balance. The 2003 Rising Tides (Syrah Grenache Mourvèdre), 2003 The Outsider (Zinfandel Syrah Mourvèdre) and 2003 Stricks & Stones (Grenache Syrah Mourvèdre).

L'Aventure: Looking for a place where he could be freer to innovate, Stephan Asseo settled in the Templeton Gap in 1998 with his wife and two children after 17 years as a winemaker in Bordeaux. Visiting the modest winery and tasting room, it was clear all the focus is on the vineyards and the wines, which were some of the most deeply flavored and complex I tasted.

Being a small production winery, several of the 2003s already were sold out but the 2003 Zinfandel Zenaida Vineyard, 2003 Optimus (syrah, cabernet sauvignon, petite verdot), and 2003 Estate Cuvee (cabernet sauvignon, syrah, petite verdot) provided ample pleasure. And the pre-release 2004's I tasted look to continue the success.

As much attention as the Templeton Gap in drawing, there also has been exciting developments in the Adelaida Hills in the northwest of Paso Robles. Over forty years ago, Dr. Stanley Hoffman recognized the area's potential and planted some of the region's first cabernet, chardonnay and pinot noir. The wines produced with legendary consultant Andre Tchelistcheff under the Hoffman Mountain Ranch label provided early proof that world-class wines could be grown in Paso Robles.

Adelaida: Today, the von Steenwyk family owns a portion of that HMR vineyard as part of a large ranch that includes about 500 acres of walnut trees and 150 acres of vineyards. Given that they have some pretty special ground, with some of the highest elevations in the area, a wide variety of slopes and orientations, and those sought after limestone soils, I wasn't surprised to see the ongoing vineyard development.

And the quality showed in the concentrated, well-structured wines – 2004 Rhone White (roussanne, grenache blanc), 2003 Pinot Noir HMR Estate, 2003 Rhone Red (mourvèdre, syrah, counoise, grenache), 2003 Viking Estate Syrah Reserve, and

2002 Viking Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve. I was surprised to find out Adelaida wines are not available in Colorado, a situation I hope is soon rectified.

Justin: During the 1990s, Justin emerged as one of the best-known wineries in Paso Robles. Justin and Deborah Baldwin had planted their dream vineyard in a remote northwestern area of the Adelaida Hills about ten miles from the Pacific Ocean in 1981. The first 100% estate wines were released in 1987 and quickly gained accolades, especially the Bordeaux-styled wines, Isosceles and Justification. Today, Justin is a sought after destination with a stylish tasting room, an elegant country inn and a gourmet restaurant. They produce a wide range of wines now but have really turned heads recently with their syrah.

Peachy Canyon. Doug and Nancy Beckett also came to Paso Robles in 1981, convinced of the area's bright future for grape growing. They established the Peachy Canyon label in 1988 and quickly built a reputation as one of California's best zinfandel producers. This is truly a family operation now, with sons Jake managing the vineyards and Josh in charge of wine-making. I have long enjoyed Peachy Canyon's zinfandels and the 2004 Incredible Red, 2003 Westside and 2003 Old School House again showed well but I was impressed with the quality of two cabernet sauvignons – 2003 Paso Robles and 2003 DeVine (a selection of the best lots).

Tablas Creek: By the late 1990's, the Westside was drawing attention and transplants from throughout the wine world. Arguably the most important newcomer was Tablas Creek, a partnership of American importer Robert Haas (Vineyard Brands) and the Perrin family of Chateau de Beaucastel in Chateauf-du-Pape. They had decided to start a winery together and searched all over the world for just the right place to plant a vineyard and they found it in the Adelaida Hills in 1989.

Their remarkable vineyard benefits from altitude, steep slopes, and cooling breezes – and it is planted with cuttings from Beaucastel. The resulting wines, southern Rhone style blends like Cotes de Tablas Blanc, Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc, Cotes de Tablas Rouge and Esprit de Beaucastel Rouge, and some notable varietals, including Mourvèdre, Syrah and Grenache Blanc are fine tributes to their French heritage.

The fact that one of the most prestigious Rhone producers had shown such faith in Paso Robles sent an undeniable signal to about the Westside's potential for greatness. The quality of the wines I found on my visit confirmed to me that the excitement about the region is justified.