

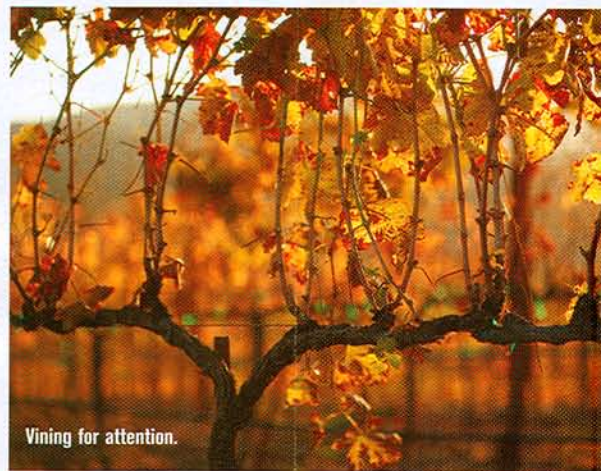
FOOD DRINK WINE

BY GILLIAN FLYNN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY K. FELLOWS



The new Hotel Cheval.

Angeleno



Vining for attention.



The other nectar.

THE ANTI-NAPA *Unpretentious Paso Robles uncorks the latest in olivo and vino*

Let's get this straight: It's *Paso Ro-bulls*, not *Paso Ro-bless*. And the pronunciation is more relevant than ever, as this Central Coast wine region is garnering international acclaim for its Rhône rangers, who produce varietals straight outta Côte du Rhône.

The "It" factor is everywhere: The chic new boutique Hotel Cheval is doling out wine and cheese on its fireplace-laden patio (romantics unite), and new restaurants like Artisan and Villa Creek are offering refined wine-country fare, farm-to-table ethos fully intact. They source organic Angus from nearby Fair Oaks Ranch and local olive oil from Pasolivo, which just took top honors at a recent international competition. The tasting room is home to bread's perfect mate: grassy, 100 percent kalamata oil. Napa who? Sonoma what?

"Paso was the frontier," says Mark Cummins, the winemaker for Wild Horse, which now produces 140,000 cases a year. "When I arrived, it was all alfalfa farms."

Our regrets, alfalfa. Today, the region's rocky soil is home to Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah, Cabernet, Viognier and Roussanne. Heck, even the winery dog at Eberle—the region's pioneer—is named Roussanne. This from the winery that gave noted winemaker Tobin James his first job and boasts one of the oldest Syrah vineyards in the U.S.

At Justin, owner Justin Baldwin was a visionary in 1981, with one sniff of his first-growth Bordeaux, he knew he was onto something. Today, the winery churns out coveted Isosceles from its whimsical compound, which includes a small inn, an intimate restaurant and a tasting room—where the reserve Tempranillo is the must-have pour.

Tablas Creek, meanwhile, is staying *absolument* French. The Rhône of the rangers is also proving that Paso is not just about red, but also whites like the 2006 Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc (Roussanne, Grenache Blanc, Picpoul Blanc), which garnered 92–95 points from His Royal Highness Robert Parker. "We felt like we were in the Wild West when we started," says winemaker Jason Haas, who, with the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel, chose this swath of land for its similarities to Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Paso's town square might just be a throwback to what now-chichi Healdsburg looked like some 20 years ago; finding an afternoon coffee can become an all-out quest. The "opening soon" signs—a new cheese shop and a kitschy candy store—are ushering in trendiness. Just don't expect pomp and circumstance.

"In Paso, we're arrogantly humble," says Steinbeck's Cindy Newkirk, who offers rugged Jeep tours of her vineyard. "We're not following the classic rules." **A**



CASK MASTER:
Jason Haas of Tablas Creek.