



• USA/WEST

The Next Napa?

In a decade, Paso Robles has transformed from a well-situated pit stop for motorists plying Highway 101 (with wineries scattered among cow pastures) to the fastest growing wine appellation in California. Is it destined to become the next Napa? Not if locals can help it.

While the new luxury Hotel Cheval, gourmet restaurants like Artisan, tasting rooms, and boutiques have given the blocks around downtown's leafy plaza an upscale twist, Paso, at its core, is still dressed-down wine country—without the less palatable notes of attitude and hyper-commercialism.

Go back to the region's roots with fifth-generation farmer Cindy Newkirk, whose family, the Steinbecks, began raising grain and cattle on their vineyard in the 1880s on the undulating land east of downtown. A century later, well after Prohibition, they returned to grapes. Newkirk takes visitors on a two-hour educational tour and picnic through the family's 500-acre "Wine-Yard" aboard an old Jeep to demonstrate the grape-growing process from planting to picking.

Down Highway 46 is Eberle Winery,

founded by the affable Gary Eberle, who helped create the Paso Robles appellation in 1983 and introduced California's first modern planting of Syrah grapes. He offers year-round cave tours and tastings.

As Highway 46 continues west to the coast—toward Hearst Castle—it cuts through scraggly oak trees and neat rows of grapevines that create a textured palette against steep, golden hillsides. Side roads climb these slopes to reach tucked-away wineries like Justin Vineyards, with a small inn and stellar picnic spots. —ANDY ISAACSON



LOGISTICS: Paso Robles is a three-hour drive from both Los Angeles and San Francisco. Check www.pasowine.com to plan winery visits and for a calendar of special events. Hotel Cheval has 16 rooms, from \$245 including breakfast; www.hotelcheval.com; chauffeured carriage service courtesy of Chester, an Amish workhorse. The Just Inn at Justin Wineries, from \$325; www.justinwine.com. It's wise to make advance reservations for Hearst Castle visits, www.hearstcastle.org. Tour 1 provides the best overview, but the evening tour is the most atmospheric.