

Crowning ACHIEVEMENTS

TRACKING A DECADE
OF PROGRESS IN
THE PASO ROBLES
CAB COLLECTIVE'S
NAMESAKE REGION

by Randy Caparoso

When the Paso Robles CAB Collective (PRCC) was founded in 2012, Rhône varieties seemed to rule the region's roost from a popularity standpoint. Yet the reality was that over 60% of the winegrapes planted in the Paso Robles AVA were, in fact, Cabernet Sauvignon and other red Bordeaux varieties—simply because they grew so well there.

The PRCC was founded by area growers and vintners who recognized the market appeal of Paso Robles-grown red Bordeaux varieties. They were also keen to initiate qualitative and stylistic changes as a group, rebuilding the region from the ground up with state-of-the-art plant material and higher-tech viticulture. As Winston Churchill once put it, "To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often."

A little more than ten years since the PRCC's founding, many of its goals in terms of educating the media, trade, and public have been accomplished: Paso Robles is now associated with top-quality Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varietal wines and blends. More importantly, though, the organization has given the region's producers a much stronger sense of how, why, and where these cultivars fit into their respective pockets of the appellation. The result has been better wines—better with respect to not just varietal style but ability to express a sense of place, be it Adelaida, Willow Creek, Estrella, Santa Margarita Ranch, or any of the other 11 districts of Paso Robles officially recognized as AVAs since 2014 or be it an individual estate or vineyard.

In other words, the standards of

perfection set by the finest wines of the world inevitably involve a clear sense of terroir. So in the process of turning the rest of the world onto Paso Robles-grown Cabernet Sauvignon and its attendant grapes, the PRCC gained a much stronger grasp of what exactly makes Paso Robles unique. They discovered *themselves*.

In 2023, then, the PRCC is as much about the first part of its name as the second: Its winemakers no longer endeavor to produce Cabernets that are just as good or better than Cabs from elsewhere. They are not satisfied with making wines that could come from anywhere. They want to fulfill the potential of Paso Robles and Paso Robles only.

I recently met with 11 different PRCC members to garner their perspectives on the first ten years of this evolution.

*Cass Winery in the
Paso Robles Geneseo
District AVA.*



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The Calcareous Vineyard estate in the Adelaida District.

Calcareous Vineyard

Winemaker Jason Joyce joined Calcareous Vineyard in 2009. This Adelaida District estate was originally planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, and Petit Verdot in 2002—a time, says Joyce, when “everyone else was thinking Paso Robles should be about Rhône’s.” It took the PRCC to, in his words, “turbo-charge our learning curve. . . . The organization became the place to share experiences more openly and readily. . . . We learned more from each other during the first six or seven years than we would have over 20 years doing things on our own.” Specifically, what they learned was “how to produce balanced Cab . . . [and] not to fear the high acidity we get from challenging, high-pH calcareous soils [while] adjusting to extreme 50-degree temperature shifts between the hot days that give our grapes sun-kissed flavors and the cold summer nights that shift [them] back into regenerative mode.”

There was a time, Joyce admits, when vintners held up Napa Valley as a standard, with the result that “some of our early wines may have been a little big, ripe, or oaky.” But once the PRCC got on a roll, he adds, “We made a course correction, recognizing the factors setting Paso Robles apart. Paso Robles Cabs are still known for plush, approachable fruit, but now we are also known for off-the-charts phenolic content. Our actual sweet spot, though, is the acidity we get in our grapes, which other regions do not have. It is the acidity that balances high tannin and keeps the fruit from soaring out of control.”

The **Calcareous 2020 Lloyd of Calcareous** (\$65)—named for the estate’s late founder Lloyd Messer—epitomizes this self-realization: A blend of 29% Cabernet Franc, 26% Merlot, 24% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Malbec, and 6% Petit Verdot, it’s more about Adelaida terroir than a sum of grapes. Showing high anthocyanin content in its near-black purple-ruby color, it also displays tannin-packed flavors of stony minerality that mingle with mountain scrub, lavender, and black and red fruit as well as lifted acidity, all pushing into a long, lip-smacking finish.



Opolo Vineyards

James Schreiner is the longtime winemaker of note at Opolo Vineyards, founded in 1999 by owner/grower Dave Nichols and co-owner Rick Quinn in what is now in the sub-AVA of Paso Robles Willow Creek District, a cooler-climate appellation whose western border is just 11 miles from the ocean.

“When we first started,” says Nichols, “our focus was primarily [on] Zinfandel, the region’s heritage grape. We still specialize in Zinfandel, which we grow on our highest hill at 1,700 feet.” That said, explains Schreiner, “In 2014 we made a stronger commitment to new plantings and clonal selections of Cabernet Sauvignon in Willow Creek—CAB Collective was a definite influence in that decision—as well as in our . . . vineyard in Paso Robles Estrella District, a warmer region that produces riper, softer wines.”

Farming on both the east and west sides of Paso Robles has “given us a strong sense of [the region,]” Nichols continues. “The common thread throughout is fruit-forward approachability. Willow Creek Cabs, though, are more pH-driven wines with bluer and blacker fruit, still approachable when young but definitely with more staying power. Our Cabernet program has grown to the point where wines now accentuate the AVA rather than just varietal character.”

Schreiner and Nichols make their case with the **Opolo 2021 Willow Creek District Reserve Collection Cabernet Sauvignon**. Considering its \$60 price point, which is low by ultra-premium standards, it is an almost shocking example of the high phenolic profile of contemporary Paso Robles wines, showing vivid pigmentation; high-flying, penetrating perfumes with minimal pyrazines; and strong, meaty, layered, mouth-coating yet elevated qualities on the palate. Instead of oak, tannin, or exaggerated extraction, it relies on acid-driven minerality to give shape to the luxuriousness of the fruit intrinsic to the vineyard.



Brecon Estate in the Adelaida District.

Brecon Estate

Brecon Estate's 13 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon in the Adelaida District are among the oldest in Paso Robles, planted in the early 1970s. The oldest Cabernet Franc vines in the region, grafted onto Chardonnay roots in the early 1980s, also belong to the producer. "When you have the oldest vines in the appellation," says owner/grower Damian Grindley, "you're not going to pull them out; you're going to work with [them] and figure out how to make [them] better every year."

Grindley's solution to enhancing the old-vine viticulture of his hillside estate—located in primarily Linne Calodo series soil just 6–18 inches deep atop calcareous bedrock—was to plant complementary grapes such as Tannat, Petit Verdot, Malbec, and Syrah. "Before the CAB Collective came along," says Grindley, "the instinct was to emulate either [the] Old World or Napa Valley. . . Cabernets typically saw a lot of oak and were picked ultra-ripe to overcome pyrazines, which made sweet, jammy styles. Over the past ten years, we've learned that this doesn't work here. Oak is not necessary to achieve balance or complexity, and monster ripeness is no longer impressive."

One initiative of the PRCC has been the introduction of new clones of Cabernet Sauvignon as well as of rootstocks favorable to calcareous soils, which are in turn conducive to grapes with lower pH and higher phenolic content. These innovations were not an option for Grindley. "Ten years ago we felt like we needed to apologize for our old-vine Cabernet, which gives lighter color and tannin," he says. "Now we emphasize those qualities by introducing different nuances [and] achieving a different level of sophistication, true to our vineyard." The **Brecon 2020 Adelaida District Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$93), for instance, is punched up with 6% Petit Verdot, which couches the wine's lithe, elegant old-vine texture in a pungent, firm, meaty profile infused with spice box, cedar, and mineral notes.

In terms of its herbaceousness and silkiness, the **Brecon 2020 Adelaida District Reserve Cabernet Franc** (\$94) might be a dead ringer for Chignon, but its almost briny minerality screams calcareous Paso Robles origins. The **Brecon 2020 Adelaida District Malbec** (\$67), blended with 20.76% Tannat, might be even more compelling, with floral and peppercorn spices lacing muscular black fruit and scrubby chaparral. "The Malbec obviously emulates Cahors," remarks Grindley, "yet [it] has all the marks of Paso Robles terroir. That's what we've learned over the past decade in concert with CAB Collective—what grows best in our own vineyards and how to coax that out in our wines."



LXV Wine owners Neeta and Kunal Mittal.

LXV Wine

Among the newer members of the PRCC (joining in 2020) is LXV Wine, whose owners/growers/winemakers, Kunal and Neeta Mittal, bring their own global perspectives to Paso Robles. They are so obsessed with Cabernet Franc, for instance, that they have recently committed to a winemaking project in Saint-Émilion. Closer to home, Neeta makes note of the fact that nearly all the members of the PRCC are family-owned. The difference between family and corporate operations, she says, is that "families are more likely to be stewards of the land and embrace sustainability as it directly impacts future generations."

While the Mittals await the first release from their home vineyard in the heart of the Willow Creek District (a 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon), their **LXV 2021 Templeton Gap Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$95), grown sustainably in the ONX Vineyard, exudes almost exotic spice and velvety, high-phenolic, acid-driven qualities that reflect soils replete with calcite (a calcium carbonate mineral common to limestone). The culinary-minded Mittals revel in this style of wine and in its affinity with the fragrant, spice market-based cuisine of their Indian heritage. Says Neeta, "LXV is a space where we bring flavors from around the world to our table . . . opening up the restrained jargon of pH and acidity . . . to a more experiential conversation of flavors and senses."

J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines

As a founder of the PRCC who served on its board during its first seven years, J. Lohr co-owner and chief brand officer Cynthia Lohr remains passionate about its mission: "Our singular focus on spotlighting the superior quality of Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon [and] Bordeaux varietals and blends has resonated with the trade and consumers—a goal that has been one and the same as J. Lohr's," she says.

The 1.8-million-case winery was founded in 1974 by Cynthia's father, Jerry Lohr; after nearly 50 years, what's often overlooked is the fact that J. Lohr still controls its own vineyards and remains committed to authentic, barrel-aged craftsmanship (see page 64). The results are serious wines that laudably retain many of the brand's distinct sensory signatures: If you love classic black currant/cassis aromas, the **J. Lohr 2018 Signature Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$100) delivers. Sourced from a windswept Creston District block at 1,700 feet in elevation, this wine is concentrated yet accessible in the Paso Robles vein, fleshed out by 1% Malbec and 7% Saint-Macaire (the latter being a near-forgotten, high-anthocyanin Bordeaux grape that Jerry Lohr still dotes on). It's a credit to the brand and the entire appellation.

J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines' Hilltop Vineyard in the Estrella District.

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Sixmilebridge Vineyards in the Adelaida District.

Sixmilebridge Vineyards

According to Sixmilebridge owner/grower Jim Moroney, "Sixmilebridge was conceived as a Bordeaux[-style] winery. ... Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux varietals are what we enjoy, so that's what we make." Moroney planted his first hilltop blocks at this Adelaida District estate in 2013 and undertook his inaugural harvest in 2016.

Winemaker Anthony Yount explains that "Sixmilebridge is blessed with steep, high slopes, starting at 2,000 feet. Below just 10 or 12 inches of topsoil, you hit deep layers of limestone. Daily breezes off the Pacific through the Templeton Gap attenuate intense sunlight from every angle. This means thick skins and lower pH in grapes. I like to think our wines go a little back to California of the '70s and '80s, when Cabernet producers weren't afraid of wild, non-fruit qualities or acid levels that used to be considered underripe. The site itself, you can say, is 'structural'—a megaphone for tannin, ageability, [and] high-energy wines. Paso Robles may be known for big, lush Cabernet, but that doesn't describe Sixmilebridge. This site produces its own expressions of Paso Robles wine."

While fragrant with red and black berries, violets, and cigar box, the **Sixmilebridge 2019 Adelaida District Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$96) is indeed a paradigm of structure: Meaty and compact, it penetrates the palate with long, savory graphite and mineral notes. This savoriness is even more multifaceted in the **Sixmilebridge 2019 Adelaida District Shannon** (\$85), which combines 46% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Merlot, 20% Malbec, 5% Cabernet Franc, and 5% Petit Verdot to yield a wine that's as tight, deep, and thunderous as a conga drum with blackberry, violet, tobacco, and wild chaparral-like scrub.



Ancient Peaks Winery's Santa Margarita Ranch in the namesake AVA.

Ancient Peaks Winery

Ancient Peaks' sprawling Santa Margarita Ranch, says co-owner/operations manager Karl Wittstrom, is located in a "no man's land" between San Luis Obispo and the rest of Paso Robles. Founding winemaker Mike Sinor candidly shares, "When the winery was founded [six years after the vineyard was planted in 1999], we were advised by distributors to specialize in Zinfandel and Syrah, but we held our ground on focusing primarily on Cabernet Sauvignon because of the pure quality of that grape coming out of the ranch. . . . Working with the CAB Collective only strengthened that resolve."

The ranch sits in the coolest-climate pocket (technically a Winkler Region II) of Paso Robles, although it is the soil—much of it ancient seabed crusted with fossilized oyster shells, while some hillsides are dominated by rocky alluvium and calcite-replete Monterey shale—that exert as much sensory influence on the brand's Bordeaux portfolio as the microclimate. Both the **Ancient Peaks 2020 Cabernet Franc** (\$50) and **Ancient Peaks 2020 Merlot** (\$22) are very much site-specific, cool-climate iterations of their varieties, pungent with spice, appealing notes of methoxypyrazine, and a pervasive underlying minerality.

The entry-level **Ancient Peaks 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$25), for its part, encapsulates the restrained, sinewy climatic personality of the site while also displaying a pop of rotundone, or black pepper, on the nose that's unusual for the variety. The **Ancient Peaks 2020 Pearl Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$72) shows the same terroir-influenced restraint—a refreshing departure from your typical California fruit bomb—while packing in black olive and flinty/mineral sensations. Finally, the **Ancient Peaks 2019 Oyster Ridge** (\$60) weaves together mineral and herbaceous notes that scream "terroir," gliding in on the velvety, fine-grained phenolic texture of the Cabernet Franc (11%) and Merlot (6%) that are added to Cabernet Sauvignon (72%), Petit Verdot (9%), and Malbec (2%).

High Camp Wines

While the Estrella District is one of Paso Robles' warmer-climate appellations, chalky calcareous hilltops and extreme diurnal temperature swings bring balance to the accessible styles of wine for which this sub-AVA is known. High Camp GM/winemaker Megan Mouren points out that "the appellation is also known for daily winds—often *too much* wind—which influences the type of wine we prefer: a feminine, acid-driven style leaning on the light side."

Noting that her family has French Basque roots, Mouren explains, "We purchased this 75-acre property to produce Bordeaux-style wines. . . . We sell 90% of our grapes to other wineries and pick and choose what we want for our own wines." Those grapes include all the Bordeaux cultivars plus Sangiovese, Grenache, Lagrein, Petite Sirah, and head-trained Zinfandel as well as Cabernet Pfeffer (also known as Mourtaou, still another rare Bordeaux variety that somehow found its way to California during the late 1800s). Mouren describes her perky, medium-bodied, clove-spiced **High Camp 2021 Tres Coyotes** (\$23)—a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon (45%), Cabernet Franc (35%), and Cabernet Pfeffer (20%)—as "the opposite of the big, extracted fruit/tannin bombs typical of California." She also playfully refers to the **High Camp 2021 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$44)—which is blended with Sangiovese (15%), Petit Verdot (5%), and Cabernet Franc (5%)—as "a reverse Super Tuscan . . . [that's] super-bright and flowery, more about the raspberry/cherry fruit and acidity of Cabernet grown on this property, which the Sangiovese only enhances. . . . [It's] a perfect example of what the vineyard wants to give."

High Camp Wines in the Estrella District.





Broken Earth Winery

The PRCC's latest member (as of this year) draws from a 2,500-acre home ranch located on Estrella District slopes that top off at 1,200 feet. Because most of its 700 planted acres consist of Cabernet Sauvignon vines dating to the early 1970s, it's undergoing a significant replanting, mostly at higher-elevation points to avoid frost pockets.

Explains winemaker Ben Mayo, "We threw our hat into the CAB Collective ring because we've specialized in Cab for so long. We also want to showcase what we get in Estrella District. This AVA sees lots of sun, which reduces pyrazines and produces that soft, friendly style Paso Robles is known for. Estrella is also a colder region than what is generally assumed. For example, we're typically two months behind other AVAs when it comes to bloom, and despite our soft tannins, we get good color retention and dark, lifted fruit." Case in point: The **Broken Earth 2019 Signature Series Estate Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$30) is shy in neither color nor the bright, cedar-laced aromas of black currant that are couched in nuances derived from 17 months in new French oak, while zesty acidity perks up the even-keeled structure, moderate at 14% ABV.



Cass Winery

Founded in 2002, Cass Winery has a track record of producing Cabernet Sauvignons that are appealing when young—a Paso Robles hallmark—yet effortlessly ageable, as fresh and lively at 15 years as they are at five. The key, according to winemaker Sterling Kragten, is the sun-soaked alluvial terrace soils typifying the Paso Robles Geneseo District AVA: "Grapes mature early enough for the wines to finish with alcohols below 14%, yet there is always enough acid/tannin structure to give them longevity."

Proffering the **Cass 2014 Reserve** (\$175)—a blend of 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Syrah, 9% Malbec, 7% Petit Verdot, and 2% Mourvèdre weighing in at just 13.5% ABV—Kragten says, "Here's an example of how well the appellation shows off not just Cabernet but also other grapes... in this case Syrah and Mourvèdre, which make a huge impact in this blend... This wine will only get better in another ten years." The **Cass 2020 M&M** (\$65) might be even more impressive: Combining Malbec (57%), Merlot (37%), and Petit Verdot (6%), it forges briary berry fruit, distinctively sage-like spice, edgy acidity, and sturdy tannin into something ultra-bright, original in its conception, and wholly unique to the vineyard.



Hearst Ranch Winery in the Paso Robles Estrella District.

Hearst Ranch Winery

Born and raised in Paso Robles, Hearst Ranch Winery owner/vintner Jim Saunders cites his agrarian roots—he represents the sixth generation of a family that's been farming in California since 1869—and sustainable practices across 90 planted acres as keys to the producer's recent growth. "The Paso Robles families who are in it for the long haul get it," he says. "We take a generational approach to the business... This may sound corny, but we are in the grape-growing and winemaking industry for the love of it—it's certainly never easy!" He credits his colleagues in the PRCC for not just their marketing savvy but also the dogged research that led to the establishment of Cabernet Sauvignon as "the backbone of our area."

It's always said that growers are more likely to produce terroir-focused wines. This is certainly exemplified by the **Hearst Ranch 2019 Proprietors Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$120), a vivid violet-ruby expression teeming with notes of red berry liqueur and scrubby mountain flower as well as notably iron-like and faintly briny mineral qualities; it's as silky and lively with acidity as a 100% Cabernet Sauvignon can be. In short, it represents yet another crowning achievement of the PRCC in its first ten years. 