

EDIBLE TRAVEL

A WEEKEND FORAY TO PASO ROBLES

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Until last fall, I'd never been to Paso Robles, a scenic wine region along California's Central Coast. I'd heard of it, of course, from long-time fans of the area who always called it simply Paso, as though the city shared a close-knit intimacy with residents and visitors alike.

Within 10 minutes of arriving, I was calling it Paso myself, cheerfully embracing the city's approachability and friendly vibe.

You, too, can be on nickname terms with Paso as (happily) a weekend trip from Silicon Valley is more than doable. The drive—150 miles from San Jose, due south along 101—takes two to two and a half hours, depending on traffic, so by the time you've caught up on your podcasts, you're there. Welcome to Paso!

WHY GO?

Like its better-known wine region siblings to the north (namely, Napa and Sonoma), Paso Robles is an oenophile's paradise. Paso's American Viticultural Area (AVA) boasts 200 wineries, offering near-endless opportunities to taste some of California's most beautiful wines.

Plus, dining options abound. Forward-thinking chefs (more on this in a moment) are creating some exciting, wine-friendly food without attitude or exorbitant pricing. And a quaint downtown—with its city park, charming general store and newly face-lifted buildings (after a 2003 earthquake)—welcomes weekend visitors keen to sip, dine and explore the many agriculturally focused offerings.

WHERE TO SIP

According to Chris Taranto, communications director for the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance, "Paso is known for its diurnal temperature swings, which makes it a great growing region for wine grapes." In fact, over 40 grape varieties thrive in over 32,000 planted acres.

Treana and Hope Family Wines (1585 Live Oak Rd., HopeFamilyWines.com) is approaching its 20th anniversary, and you can sip a selection of wines across its five brands in its chic, deep blue tasting room. Among the many options are the rich, ripe 2013 Treana Chardonnay (100% Chardonnay) and the cleansing, lemony 2013 Treana White (50% Marsanne, 50% Viognier). Arrive early enough and you may find yourself quaffing a breakfast cocktail with Chardonnay, lime juice, triple sec and tonic.

Le Cuvier Winery (3333 Vine Hill Ln., LCWine.com) offers food pairings (\$15) in its 4-year-old tasting room/gift shop, but to really immerse yourself in the winery's offerings, head down to the Library Room, where 10,000 bottles (all sulfite-free) line the walls and a table for 12 allows for a group sipping (and educational) experience. Le Cuvier's wine club members also get the pleasure of owner/winemaker John Munch's cheeky newsletters, in which he muses over the varietal-driven bottles with plenty of humor and not a drop of pretense.

WHERE TO EAT

Dining in wine country offers a unique confluence of edible, drinkable and aesthetic pleasures. In Paso Robles, you'll find plenty of spots to enjoy smartly prepared food, and if you play your cards

right, you'll enjoy your meals alongside (or within steps of) sprawling vineyards and expansive vistas. Downtown Paso also has gems of its own.

On Thursdays through Sundays from 11am to 4pm, lunch at **Niner Wine Estates** (2400 Highway 46 West, NinerWine.com) gains you access to Chef Maegen Loring's exquisite cuisine. Loring, whose long career has included catering at Hearst Castle, restaurant ownership and running a large hotel's pastry program, now helms the Niner open kitchen with preternatural calm and professionalism. Her upscale, wine-friendly food (a private dinner menu included filet of beef with red chile butter and charred corn polenta as well as chevre risotto with grilled radicchio, pancetta and tarragon) includes unexpected touches like puffed wild rice, or a cocoa vinaigrette atop duck confit with plums. The dining room abuts Niner's sophisticated tasting room, which showcases the 100% estate-grown wines, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Two blocks off the heart of downtown, **The Hatch Rotisserie & Bar** (835 13th St., HatchPasoRobles.com) offers expertly prepared comfort food in a lively setting. (Try the Caesar with charred romaine, the Hatch chicken with hot sauce and the white cheddar grits.)

And **Thomas Hill Organics** (1313 Park St., ThomasHillOrganics.com) makes a crispy pork belly sandwich on brioche with macerated red onion, carrot and avocado that's so good, it'll make you want to set down roots and never leave.

AGRICULTURAL EXPERIENCES

While Paso is better known for its almonds, plan a visit to **Limerock Orchards** (6996 Peachy Canyon Rd., LimerockOrchards.com), a dry-farmed, certified organic walnut orchard with 23 acres of stately trees dating back to 1963. Tree varieties like the alternate bearing Frankette (which cycles productive with less productive annual harvests) and Hartley produce walnuts with rich, creamy textures devoid of the tannic bitterness common to some commercial varieties. "We're in a particular microclimate here," says Limerock's owner Deanne Gonzales, who emphasizes the importance of biodiversity. She's also committed to organic production, stating plainly, "We don't want chemicals or poisons on our property."

After visiting the trees, walk over to the tasting room to try the nuts, which Gonzalez roasts with walnut oil and a pinch of salt and sugar. And don't leave without sampling the chocolate walnuts, dipping some bread in Limerock's walnut oil, or picking up a jar of walnut butter. It's processed from Gonzalez's walnuts (though production takes place out in San Joaquin Valley since laws prohibit processing fats on agricultural properties), and the omega-3 rich butter makes an indulgent, not-to-be-missed souvenir.

Set aside a half day (or a few hours) to take a class through **FARMstead Ed** (FARMsteadEd.com), which Lynette Sonne founded to connect locals and visitors with the hardworking farmers and ranchers who produce the region's food. Part educational experience, part roving pop-up, the 2-year-old business offers a variety of classes to give well-earned visibility to those who might otherwise toil behind the scenes in the region's fields and kitchens.

"I know a lot of local producers, and people were always asking me



Above: Katie Hayward from Uncorked Wine Tours. Upper right: Lynette Sonne from FARMstead ED. Lower photos at right and on opposite page: Limerock Orchards, grove and walnut oil product. Opposite page, top: Treana and Hope Family Wines



where they could buy great local meat or goat cheese. Our locals don't even know where to find food from our small producers because the producers don't have marketing teams or budgets. They're too busy farming!"

Here's how it works: FARMstead Ed takes registrations (monthly classes generally range from \$45 to \$85), then brings visitors to a farmstead or ranch where, Sonne says, "They have a hands-on experience making things onsite." Past classes have included How to Grow Your Own Cocktail Garden; How to Plant Your Own Salad Bowl; How to Make Your Own Bacon; and How to Make Shrubs and Syrups with Your Own Botanicals, among many others. Guests leave with the products they've created and a new skill set they can employ back home.

"We all need each other," she says about the connections forged through these events. "We cannot do what we do without each other."

WHERE TO STAY AND HOW TO GET AROUND

Allegretto Vineyard Resort Paso Robles (2700 Buena Vista Dr., AllegrettoVineyardResort.com). Brand new, sprawling and ornate, this Italian-style destination resort and spa offers 14-foot ceilings, yoga in an onsite abbey and enormous showers.

Paso Robles Inn (1103 Spring St., PasoRoblesInn.com). A renovated three-star property downtown, the Inn is an affordable alternative within walking distance of plentiful tasting rooms, restaurants and shops.

Paso Robles Vacation Rentals (PasoRoblesVacationRentals.com). The area's own version of Airbnb.

Ditch your car and hire a knowledgeable driver/guide instead. It's safer, more relaxing and you'll enjoy the insight of a spirited local. **Uncorked Wine Tours** (UncorkedWineTours.net) offers a variety of customized packages. ✕



Cheryl Sternman Rule (CherylSternmanRule.com) is an award-winning Silicon Valley food writer and cookbook author. Her newest book is *Yogurt Culture: How to Make, Bake, Sip and Chill the World's Creamiest, Healthiest Food*.

