

Through the Grapevine

BY SUZANNE KOCH

It may not be Napa, but that's why you go.

Before arriving in Paso Robles, I took a solo trip up the coast from San Luis Obispo to just north of San Simeon along the Highway 1 Discovery Route. Recently reopened after a mudslide shut it down, it stretches 101 miles up California's central coast from Nipomo to Ragged Point, where the iconic entrance to Big Sur is. My stay at Cambria's Oceanpoint Ranch was accompanied by a visit to the Brown Butter Cookie Company, Hearst Castle and my first horseback ride at family-owned Covell's California Clydesdale, the perfect prep for what was soon to come: wine.

After two days along the coast, I headed inland for 40 minutes on a winding road toward the land of sunshine and grapes: Paso Robles. Located in between San Francisco and Los Angeles, Paso Robles is more approachable than its more famous counterparts up north. It's also warmer and easier on the wallet. While a Napa wine tasting might easily cost you \$50, most in Paso are a mere \$15. That means more wine tastings, which means more happiness. And that warm weather and cool nights during grape-growing season translates to prime conditions for those deep reds, even Rhône varietals. Say no more.

Since many wineries in Paso are still family-owned and -operated, don't be shocked to find yourself getting a personal tour by the winemaker in between sips of vino. I even found myself climbing the ladder up the side of a vat to peek into the churning red grapes during harvest season (thanks Joe at Grey Wolf Cellars!). And since the community is so small and friendly, many winemakers know each other and sometimes even collaborate. Forget competition; this place is just a lot great wine and a lot of friendly faces.

Book a stay at either the 16-room boutique Hotel Cheval in the heart of downtown or at the city's first luxury hotel, Allegretto





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Vineyard Resort. The eclectic stay is backed up by a vineyard where they produce their own wine label. From the Italian villa exterior, you'd never guess the inside was lined with art from the Far East, a Moroccan-inspired cupola and other worldly elements. It even has its own tasting room just off the lobby so you can get to sipping immediately post check-in.

The wineries in Paso are located on the west and east side of Highway 101. Consider dedicating one day to each side for the easiest way to explore (and drink). On the west side, Parrish Family Vineyards has recently opened a new tasting room with amazing vineyard views and interiors that will give Pottery Barn a run for its money. Other standouts include SummerWood Winery, Grey Wolf Cellars/KROBAR Distillery and PasoPort/Pendray's Distillery. When on the east side, you'll find one of Paso's bigger names, J. Lohr, which is still family-owned and -operated. A short distance from there, Vina Robles Vineyards & Winery is home to an on-site amphitheatre (yes, you read that right) that's hosted big name acts like Willie Nelson and Kip Moore during their yearly concert series April through November. They also boast killer food. Be sure to try the Älplermagronen, a Swiss version of mac and cheese, and the to-die-for truffle potato chips.

Clearly, with great wine comes great food and eating in downtown Paso is just as divine as drinking. The upscale Mexican restaurant Fish Gaucho is a must-try, with items like duck confit empanadas and short rib enchiladas. It also offers an easy break from wine with its great tequila selection. Jeffrey's Wine Country BBQ has all the classic fixings from tri-tip sandwiches to award-winning mac and cheese. And for after-dinner drinks search out 1122, a speakeasy lounge that F. Scott Fitzgerald would definitely approve of. Think sound-proof tufted walls, a mirror-backed bar, gilded bar carts and smoking cocktails—literally.

From casual wineries to standout food, and the coast to the vineyards, Central California is full of surprises, both delicious and adventurous.



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