





# PASO ROBLES

## FINE WINES AND THE SPIRIT OF THE OLD WEST

By Judi Rothenberg

**T**he West Coast. Are you thinking L.A., San Fran, Napa and San Diego? Maybe “been there, done that?”

I thought those things too, until I met fellow Jersey resident Walter Whyte, sales director of a California vineyard called Peachy Canyon. He poured me a glass of their Cirque Du Vin, and as the aromas of black currants, sage and leather filled my senses, Whyte told me about the wine country of Paso Robles. Paso what? Wine country? Hey, I’m an oenophile, a foodie and a California native, so why hadn’t I heard of Paso Robles? And where the heck is it?

Turns out, Paso (that’s what locals call it) is a sleepy little town smack dab between San Francisco and Los Angeles (about a four-hour drive from each) surrounded by wineries. Although you’re more likely to see pickup trucks than limos here, don’t be fooled by the unpretentious, casual setting. The food is sophisticated and the shops are upscale, unique and full of personality.

“It’s like Napa 30 years ago,” says Josh Beckett, a second-generation winemaker at Peachy Canyon. He should know. There were just five other producers in 1988 when his parents

Doug and Nancy started the label. Today, Paso Robles is home to nearly 200 wineries replete with all manner of tasting rooms from rustic to lavish. The area’s distinctive soils and many microclimates are well suited to grow a variety of grapes. While Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and Chardonnay are all found here, Zinfandel is king. It even has its own annual festival. In its 19th year, the Zinfandel Festival usually features walk-around tastings, food and wine pairings, chef demonstrations and a wine country auction.

A stay in Paso has the added benefit of being just forty-five minutes from the ocean and the rugged coast. A beautiful scenic drive through a landscape of golden rolling hills, grazing cattle, horse ranches and vineyards leads you to a variety of activities along Highway 1. Follow the road north a few minutes to the historic Hearst Castle and make your way to Piedras Blancas, a vista point along the highway that’s home to thousands of elephant seals. To the south the beachfront towns of Cayucos and Morro Bay offer boating, surfing and swimming. [pasowine.com](http://pasowine.com), [cayucosbythesea.com](http://cayucosbythesea.com), [morro-bay.net](http://morro-bay.net)



Courtesy Hearst Castle/California State Parks



## HEARST CASTLE AND ELEPHANT SEALS

Newspaper magnate, art collector extraordinaire and legendary host William Randolph Hearst began construction on a weekend “ranch” in 1919 on a hilltop high above the Pacific coastline of San Simeon. Building continued for 28 years, resulting in a compound of three guest cottages, a 60,645-square-foot main house (38 bedrooms, 41 bathrooms, a screening room and a game room), a private zoo and two elaborate swimming pools (indoor and outdoor).

Hearst, with girlfriend and movie star Marion Davies by his side, welcomed the Hollywood elite and the 20th century’s high-profile moguls and politicians to his pleasure palace with gracious hospitality.

Today, the extravagant property is owned by the California Park Service and is open to the general public for touring. Several different tours are available and some visitors like to book more than one. The tours sell out quickly and you should make reservations. The visitor’s center offers a 40-minute movie called “Building the Dream” that details the history of the castle with original cinematography, vintage clips and stills from the 1920s and ‘30s. The film is projected on a five-story screen and is included in the Experience Tour ticket. [hearthcastle.org](http://hearthcastle.org), 800.444.4445

If you’re hungry after the tour, skip the cafeteria offerings and cross over Highway 1 to historic Sebastian’s General Store & Cafe in Old San Simeon Village. Locals, surfers and, yes, tourists munch down everything from Chinese chicken salad to French dip sandwiches made with Hearst Ranch beef. The tasting room for Hearst Ranch Wines is located here as well. [hearthranchwinery.com](http://hearthranchwinery.com)

After lunch, head 15 minutes north to Piedras Blancas to visit the elephant seals. Depending on the season, you may witness

females giving birth to their young or males battling for mates and pups frolicking in the surf. The rookery population peaks three times during the year: in late January, late April and late October. Although our visit was in August when the number of seals was very low (about 20), we still thought it worth the short drive to get a close glimpse of these fascinating creatures. [www.elephantseal.org](http://www.elephantseal.org)

## STAY

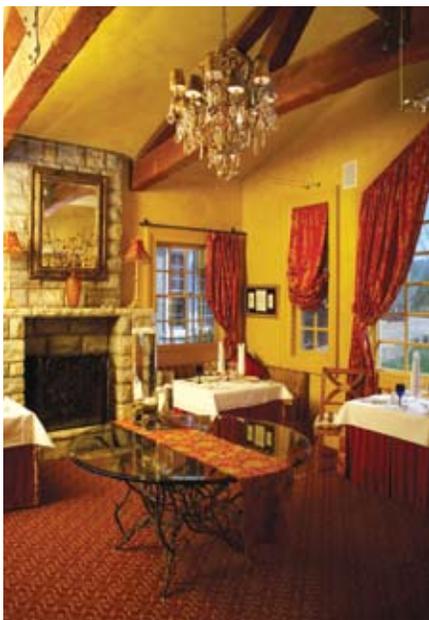
From bed and breakfasts to sophisticated hotels, there’s a wide range of choices for lodging. In town, just steps away from leafy City Park, is Hotel Cheval. Rooms are appointed with heavenly beds and individual fireplaces. Peachy Canyon Vineyards rents out a modest but roomy cottage that stands solo in the middle of their Mustard Creek Vineyard. The posh and secluded Just Inn at Justin Winery offers four elegant suites, a lovely swimming pool and the gourmet restaurant, Deborah’s Room. [justinwine.com](http://justinwine.com), 805.238.6932, 11680 Chimney Rock Road; [hotelcheval.com](http://hotelcheval.com), 866.522.6999

## EAT

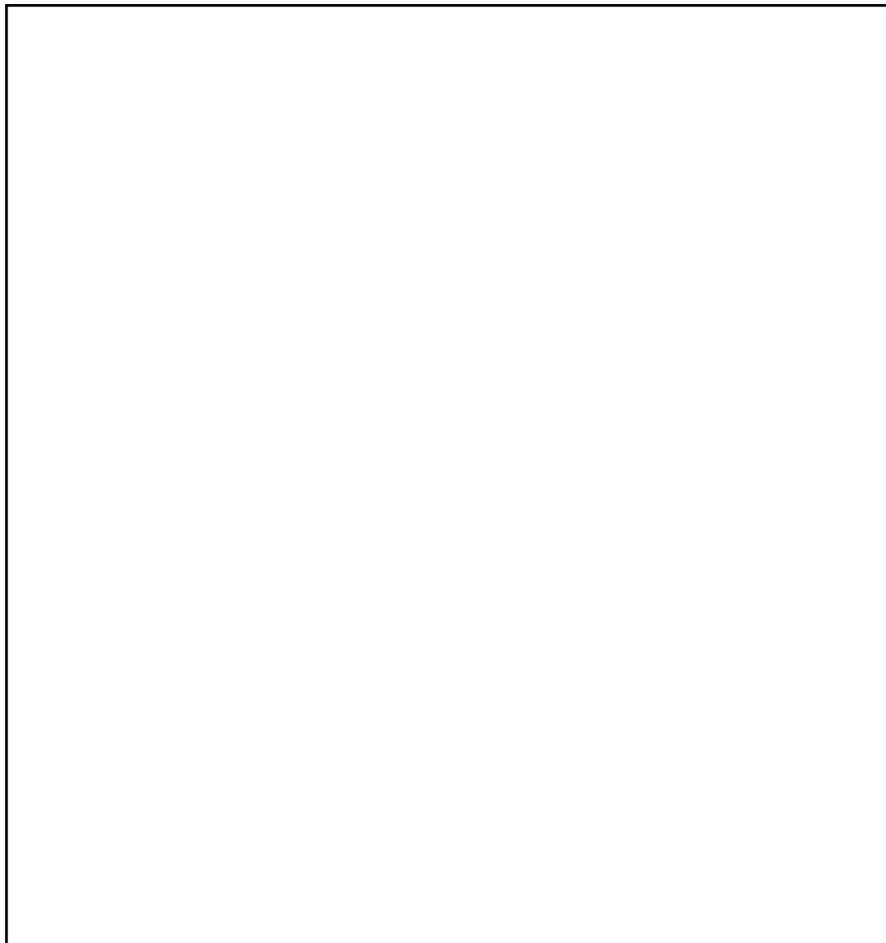
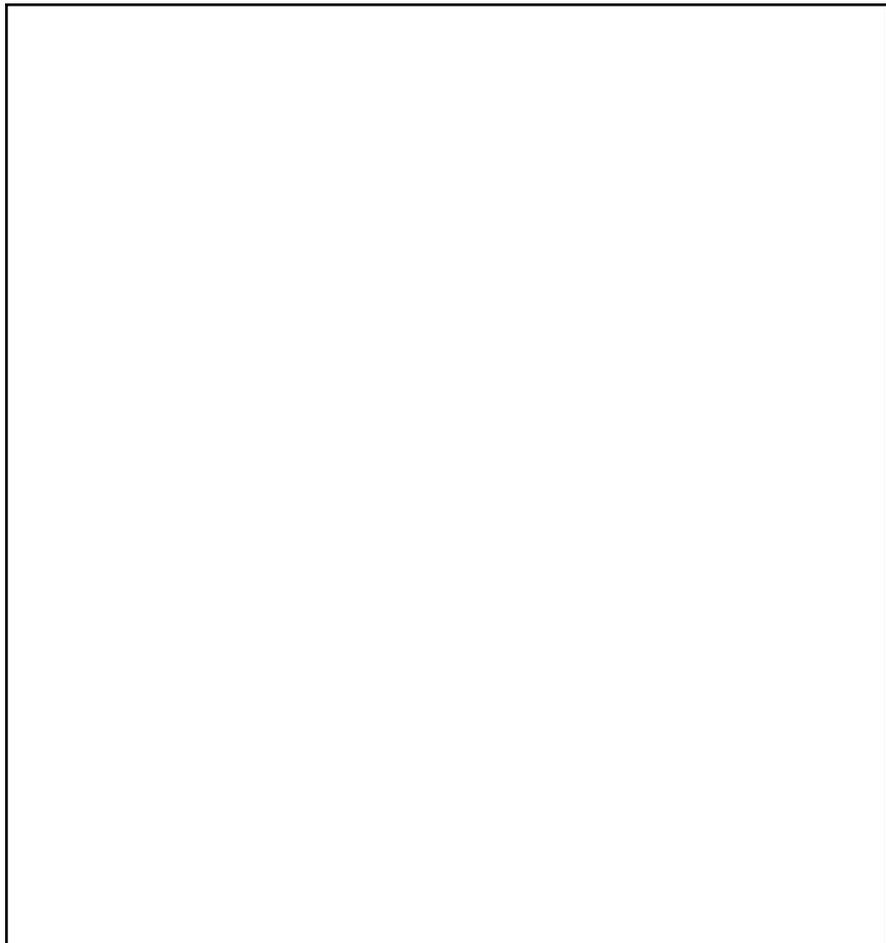
**Thomas Hill Organics Market Bistro and Wine Bar.** The menu is based on fresh organic produce from the restaurant’s own farm. Although the menu changes with the availability of ingredients, there are usually several pizza offerings and they are superb. If the thin-crust Verde Pork pizza is on the menu, order it! The pie is studded with mozzarella, anaheim peppers, red onion, corn, creme fraiche and cilantro, a real taste sensation. Outdoor seating in the courtyard is the preferred spot. [thomashillorganics.com](http://thomashillorganics.com), 805.226.5888

**Amsterdam Coffee Roasters.** A casual spot for seriously good coffee, a fresh scone or one of their specialty drinks, the Mexican Mocha. A great hang-out place with free Wi-Fi and a welcoming atmosphere. Baby strollers and dogs welcome! 805.239.7779, 725 13th Street

**Artisan.** Contemporary American cuisine that emphasizes local, organic and sustainably raised ingredients such as Hearst Ranch grass-fed beef, Templeton farm-raised chicken and red abalone from Cayucos. The art deco building makes a sophisticated setting. artisanpasorobles.com, 805.237.8084, 1401 Park Street, Paso Robles



**Deborah's Room.** Intimate, very intimate (there are just seven tables) romantic dining. The room is elegantly styled with rich fabrics, a sparkling chandelier, candlelight and a stone fireplace. The prix fixe menu (\$90) has five creative courses that change nightly. The appetizer course might include options like white corn soup with Sriracha creme fraiche, fried oysters and caviar or a pan-seared Hudson Valley foie gras with pickled white peaches. The second and third courses are from the sea and the farm, respectively, followed by a delectable and unique cheese course. There are intriguing dessert choices as well.



## TASTING ROOMS

Let your palate be your guide. Visit some of your favorite labels but leave time to try something new. Olive oil tastings are also available.

**Four Vines.** Self-described rogue winemaker Christian Tietje offers five Zins for your consideration along with Chardonnay, Syrah, Petite Sirah, Rhone, Tempranillo, Barbera and Port. The bold black-and-white tasting room is accented with striking red-glass chandeliers, and the custom-etched Riedel tasting glasses make great souvenirs. [fourvines.com](http://fourvines.com), 805.237.0055, 3750 Highway 46 West, Templeton

**Peachy Canyon.** Tastings of Estate Zinfandels and 15-plus handcrafted small batch Rhone & Bordeaux varietals are in the historic Old Bethel School House (circa 1886). We fell in love with the non-vintage Zinfandel Port VIII and purchased several bottles. [peachycanyon.com](http://peachycanyon.com), 805.237.2861, 1480 N. Bethel Road (on the corner of Highway 46 West), Templeton

**Chronic Cellars.** Wine made comfortable and accessible, courtesy of brothers Josh and Jake Beckett. The bohemian tasting room has a pool table, and the wines have names like Sofa King Bueno (Syrah, Grenache and Petite Sirah blend) and Purple Paradise (Zinfandel with a touch of Petite-Sirah). [chroniccellars.com](http://chroniccellars.com), 805.237.7848, 2020 Nacimiento Lake Drive

**Tablas Creek Vineyard.** Well-regarded Rhone varietals and Chateauneuf-du-Pape style blends to sample and twice-daily tours (advance reservations suggested) for those interested in learning about winemaking. [tablascreek.com](http://tablascreek.com), 805.237.1231, 9339 Adelaida Road

### OLIVE OIL TASTINGS

**We Olive.** Charming downtown shop with tastings, an olive bar and an array of specialty foods and ceramics. [weolive.com](http://weolive.com), 805.239.7667, 1311 Park Street

**Pasolivo.** Olive oil tastings and tour of the olive press at Willow Creek Olive Ranch. [pasolivo.com](http://pasolivo.com), 805.227.0186, 8530 Vineyard Drive

