

{ central coast }

SURROUNDED BY *Sustainability*

FROM VINE MANAGEMENT TO
COMMUNITY SUPPORT, MEMBERS OF
THE **PASO ROBLES CAB COLLECTIVE**
REVEAL HOW THINKING GREEN
BUILDS BETTER BUSINESS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PASO ROBLES CAB COLLECTIVE

*A dog wanders
through Castoro
Cellars' vineyard.*

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by Stacy Briscoe

Paso Robles traces its wine history as far back as the late 1700s, but it truly came into its own when Dr. Stanley Hoffman and André Tchelistcheff planted some of the region's first Cabernet Sauvignon vines in the 1960s. By the time Paso Robles gained AVA status in 1983, local pioneers Jerry Lohr, Gary Eberle, and Justin Baldwin (to name a few) had crowned Cabernet as the regional king.

Though varietal planting has since expanded, Paso Robles' wine-growing backbone remains solidly rooted in the potential it harbors for Bordeaux grapes, largely due to the diverse soil types, topography, and microclimates that define the region's landscape of rolling hills: Thanks to this variability, no two vineyards grow the same grapes in quite the same way, and no two winemakers produce identical wines.

Dedicated to promoting this storied winemaking tradition is the Paso Robles CAB Collective (PRCC), whose members aim to produce not only high-quality wines but also expressions that wholly embody their unique piece of Paso Robles. For several of them, a key component of that mission is sustainability.



J. LOHR VINEYARDS & WINES

Sustainability has been a central part of the J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines story since founder Jerry Lohr arrived in Paso Robles in 1986. Having grown up on a farm in South Dakota in the 1940s and '50s, he wasn't accustomed to using chemicals or irrigation, according to his son Steve Lohr, who now serves as CEO of the family-run winery. "Soil health was always important and dry farming was the norm," he notes of his family's approach.

While a farmer's intuition may have launched the J. Lohr name, the company's modern success is tied to the family's tireless promotion of environmentally sound practices in all sectors of their business. J. Lohr's wineries in Paso Robles and Monterey County are both solar powered, and much of the work in the vineyard has been focused on soil and water conservation. "When we came to Paso Robles in the 1980s, it was believed that there was a limitless supply of water available. Even though the region was dry, we were sitting on top of a large aquifer," Steve recalls. But over time, the water table dropped, and farmers were forced to be more mindful of their water usage.

According to Director of Winemaking Steve Peck, the J. Lohr viticultural team has adopted the best available tools for monitoring and controlling vine water stress during the growing season in order to drive conservation and wine quality.



J. Lohr Director of Winemaking Steve Peck.

Those tools go beyond soil-moisture measurement, ranging from a labor-intensive pressure-chamber reference method that directly measures the vines' water stress to new Tule Technologies evapotranspiration sensors that continuously evaluate the moisture flowing into the atmosphere from the vineyard. "It's all about how much water is available to the plant," Peck says. "The system measures moisture in the wind currents that go through the vineyard [and] how much water is escaping from the vines, the cover crops, and even the bare ground underneath the vines." These

tests zero in on the specific water needs of individual blocks and inform every decision the company makes regarding irrigation.

Other sustainable initiatives implemented by J. Lohr include the utilization of permanent cover crops without tilling to increase biodiversity, keep the soil moist, and mitigate dust; the winery has also upgraded from diatomaceous-earth filtration to cross-flow filtration, which does not require replacement sheets or cartridges that then must be disposed of responsibly.

The list extends beyond grape growing and winemaking to permeate the

J. Lohr's Shotwell Vineyard is located in the El Pomar AVA.



company's culture as well. Thanks to its commitment to long-term environmental, economic, and social sustainability, J. Lohr received the Green Medal Leader Award for 2020, confirming its "ability to balance multiple objectives ... with sustainability being clearly integrated into the overall business."

"It's about inspiring others around you," Steve Lohr says. "When we're sharing best practices, it makes for better wines and a better environment overall."

J. Lohr 2017 Pure Paso Proprietary Red, Paso Robles The inaugural release of this royal purple-hued blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah (with small amounts of Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Malbec) is a nod to the winery's 30-plus years of grape growing in Paso Robles. Aged 18 months in barrel (20% new), it's a silky beauty that exudes aromas of cedar, blueberry, and ripe, spiced plum. Dusty tannins develop into a juicier texture as it opens up to lip-smacking notes of ripe black fruit and dried violets. Most of the grapes were sourced from the El Pomar District, which Peck calls "the sweet spot of Paso Robles."

RIBOLI FAMILY WINES

Riboli Family Wines' new tasting room in Paso Robles.



The family behind Riboli Family Wines has been part of the Paso Robles wine industry for more than a century. The winery was officially certified sustainable by the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance in 2019, but according to fourth-generation owner and winemaker Anthony Riboli, it had essentially been in compliance for several years beforehand as part of a wider initiative focused on sustainability.

In 2016, Riboli Family Wines completed construction of its first estate winemaking facility designed with energy efficiency in mind; it's outfitted with a night-cooling system that turns off refrigeration and brings in external air to keep the building cool as well as a wastewater-treatment system and solar paneling.

In terms of winemaking, Riboli says that having a facility designed for proper sanitation is important for both wine quality and employee health and safety. Good drainage and properly coated concrete floors equate to less buildup of spilt juice and wine and, thus, less need for chemical cleaners. Then, regarding layout, he says

they "tried to create an open space that's easy for driving forklifts and foot traffic. Basic things make a difference—not just in how the employees feel but in how efficient they can be."

Riboli continues, "When we moved away from custom crush in 2016, the first harvest in the new winery, the wines were different—there's a new level of aromatics and complexity, and a lot of that is due to cleanliness."

Riboli Family San Simeon Estate Reserve 2016 Stormwatch, Paso Robles

We have closely followed (and admired) this masterful Bordeaux-meets-Robles red from vintage to vintage. The 2016, which blends 54% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Malbec, 15% Merlot, 10% Petit Verdot, and 3% Cabernet Franc, features heady and bold aromas of black licorice, dark chocolate, and black plum. It's chewy, fleshy, and broad-shouldered on the palate, with cocoa-powdered tannins and a weighty mouthfeel. Leather and black fruit join forces on the finish.

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Castoro Cellars' tasting room is nestled within its estate vineyard.

A field of solar panels on the Castoro Cellars estate.

CASTORO CELLARS

Castoro Cellars was one of the original 13 wineries to participate in the Sustainability in Practice (SIP) pilot program back in 2008; today, all of its estate vineyards are certified organic through California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). "We've always tried to be good stewards," says Castoro Cellars founder Niels Udsen. "As we acquired and developed more land, we always had that in mind."

Although Udsen has been making and selling his wine under the Castoro Cellars label since 1983, he and his wife and co-founder, Bimmer Udsen, purchased a vineyard and winery in 1991. He found the certification process for SIP and CCOF to be fairly straightforward. "We were already [performing the necessary practices], but it was nice to see that someone would quantify and qualify those efforts," he adds.

The Udsens admit that fully implementing organic farming on all of their properties was a significant investment, but "as we got better at it, it didn't end up costing that much," Niels says. And in the long run, he notes, practices like water conservation, solar energy, and replacing synthetic chemicals with natural nutrients have actually saved money.

Castoro Cellars is also farming Biodynamically on some sites. "We are learning a tremendous amount and seeing many benefits," Niels says. "One of our vineyards that's farmed Biodynamically is so much [healthier than it was]. . . Everything is so much more vibrant, and that [equates] to happy grapes."

For Niels, the health and wellness of his employees is just as important as that of his grapes, a principle he says is particularly em-

braced by the SIP program. "SIP [considers] how you treat your employees [as part of sustainability]: If people feel good about what they're doing, they're going to do a better job every day," he adds. "That's an element often forgotten about in other programs."

Castoro Cellars 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Paso Robles Winemaker Tom Myers sources 20% of his fruit from Whale Rock Vineyard in the Templeton Gap, where old sea bones can still be found in the soil. This cooler sub-AVA contrasts with Cab from the Estrella District, whose warmer temperatures impart ripeness and color in its wines. Aged 14 months in small oak barrels, this expression possesses firm tannins, sumptuous fruit, and a unique flavor of poppy seed that's layered amid the fruit and savory notes.



Niner Wine Estates runs entirely on solar power.

NINER WINE ESTATES

Niner Wine Estates was the first winery on the Central Coast to achieve a LEED certification for its production and hospitality buildings, which run entirely on solar power. But while energy efficiency is a major component of the winery's sustainability efforts, President Andy Niner notes that water conservation is equally critical: "Generally, in Paso Robles, you have to think about water sustainability as an ongoing process. You're never at a point where you feel comfortable."

With this in mind, the tasting room's rooftop features a rain-collection system;

in the winery, meanwhile, wastewater reclamation captures water from cellar drains. What's accumulated from both sources is then redirected into ponds that serve as a source for vineyard irrigation. In all, the estate is able to save more than 1 million gallons of water each year.

Niner Wine Estates has also started its own composting program with harvest waste, combining must, stems, and MOG (aka "material other than grapes") with woodchips and microbes to create an ideal formula for vine nutrients. "We're trying to test whether a strategy of compost tea

plus no tilling will work in our vineyard," Niner says. "Specifically, if we can establish a good microbiota and preserve it by not breaking up the soil, will that result in greater disease resistance and healthier vines?" He notes that they're only in year one of a five-year-long experiment, so he and his team still have a lot to learn.

Niner Wine Estates 2016 Fog Catcher, Paso Robles Meaty, juicy, and big-bodied, with chalky tannins; aromas and flavors of plum liqueur, heather, and violets; and a luxurious, silky mouthfeel.

Niner Wine Estates' Heart Hill Vineyard in the Willow Creek District AVA.



ANCIENT PEAKS WINERY

Ancient Peaks Winery co-founder Doug Filipponi reclaimed ownership of his Margarita Vineyard property in 2005 when the Mondavi family sold their business to Constellation Brands. According to Filipponi, several sustainable initiatives had already been put in place by the Mondavis, but over the past 15 years, he and his team have implemented additional measures for the betterment of his vines—and, as a result, his wines.

In the vineyard, for example, the frost-protection sprinkler system has been reconfigured to reduce its water use by roughly one-third, with newly installed wind machines now serving as the primary tool for combating spring frosts. “It’s beneficial in more than one way. Not only do the wind machines save water; the use of sprinklers for water protection actually produces excess canopy growth that will eventually have to be removed,” Filipponi says. Mitigating this growth means decreasing the number of tractor trips through the vineyard for pruning, which in turn reduces diesel usage. It also prevents soil compaction, which would have to be addressed with more diesel-fueled trips for tilling.

Other initiatives Ancient Peaks has carried out since 2005 include adding a wastewater facility, installing solar panels in both the vineyard and the winery,



Mike Sinor is Director of Winemaking at Ancient Peaks Winery.

composting must and pomace, and even racking less—a technique that he says conserves water while improving wine quality due to less oxygen exposure.

“One of the three legs of sustainability is that you have to be able to make a profit. If you’re not, you’re not sustainable,” Filipponi adds. “It’s important that the company can sustain itself and that the things you do improve both the profitability and the health of the vineyard.”

Ancient Peaks 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Margarita Ranch, Paso Robles

Just 14 miles from the Pacific, the southernmost AVA in Paso Robles is also its coolest, boasting the region’s longest growing season. Director of Winemaking Mike Sinor’s thoughtful blend of 88% Cabernet Sauvignon with small percentages of the other four Bordeaux varieties offers structure, vibrancy, and dimension. Inviting aromas of sweet earth, black olive, and blackberry precede a sumptuous mouthfeel with polished tannins and a backdrop of heather. There’s a line of chalkiness inherent to the terroir that works in tandem with balanced acidity and flavors of spiced cedar, espresso, and ripe plum.

The lush Santa Margarita AVA, where Ancient Peaks Winery is located, is nearly a monopoly, as most of the land under vine there belongs to the winery’s estate.



ALLEGRETTO WINES

Allegretto Wines owner Douglas Ayres is a huge proponent of Biodynamic farming, which he sees as the central ethos of his company's approach in the vineyard and winery. While he isn't intent on seeking an official Biodynamic certification, he already goes above and beyond the formal farming requirements. "There are a lot of aspects that I dive into that aren't always mentioned in Biody-

namics, mainly about setting up a line of communication and interacting with the vineyard," Ayres says of making decisions on everything from vine spacing and row orientation to canopy management. "I'll inquire and be granted permission from the land before I do anything."

The 40-acre Willow Creek Vineyard in the Willow Creek sub-AVA is dedi-

The Allegretto Vineyard Resort's bell tower peaks over the estate vineyard.

cated to Cabernet Sauvignon, while the 7.75-acre Allegretto Vineyard in the Estella District sub-AVA is planted to select French clones of Cabernet, Malbec, and Tannat as well as Vermentino and Viognier. "Where each is planted is totally chosen by the land and the varietal. There's a specific place where the vine wants to go, so I adhere to that," Ayres explains. "And the formation of what unfolds—the geometry and the layout—is just amazing." The benefit of this approach, he notes, is that he pays more attention to every detail in the vineyard. "Nothing goes unobserved," Ayres says.

Allegretto 2016 Ayres Family Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Allegretto Vineyards, Paso Robles Chocolate, rhubarb, and mountain brush are sweet and savory on the nose. Enveloped in crushed violets, plum, and leather; chalky tannins persist alongside focused acidity that wakes up the fruit while creating a sense of balance. *sj*

Sunset in the Willow Creek Vineyard.