

Paso Robles 2021

Focusing in on this diverse region in California's Central Coast, 2021 tells a story of challenging weather conditions, with drought continuing from the previous year. Yet where vineyards were managed successfully, the resulting quality is being rated as among the best of recent times

REPORT & SELECTION BRIANNE COHEN

After a challenging 2020 vintage, 2021 arrived in this key region in California's Central Coast with near-perfect conditions, though with lower than ideal yields. Where successful, the best examples showed power and balance with acidity as a welcome foil.

Jason Haas, proprietor at Tablas Creek Vineyard, calls 2021 in Paso Robles 'the recipe for a really great, blockbuster-style vintage' and 'as you would if you could design a vintage from scratch'.

For many, bud break in 2021 was earlier than normal, there were no major heat spikes, and it was a relatively long growing season and ripening cycle, because the beginning of the season was so early. Harvest was slightly early to average for most, with almost everyone I spoke to commenting on the lower-than-normal yields brought on by water stress caused by drought.

Paso Robles 2021: Cohen's picks

STAR RATING
★★★★★

(£28-£29.50 Shelved Wine, Vinoteca)

Giornata, Rosso (\$25 giornatawines.com)

Thacher, Own-Rooted Chenin Blanc (\$36 thacherwinery.com)

KEY PRODUCERS

L'Aventure

Saxum

Tablas Creek Vineyard

WINES OF THE VINTAGE

(see wine notes, p72)

White Tablas Creek, Esprit de Tablas Blanc 94

VALUE PICKS

Tablas Creek, Patelin de Tablas Blanc

Red Saxum, James Berry Vineyard 96

The result was smaller berry size, smaller clusters, and therefore a smaller crop. One exception to this was Alta Colina in the Adelaida District ▶

Below: L'Aventure Winery benefited from its moisture-retaining limestone soils during the drought conditions of 2021 (see p70)

‘Where successful, the best examples showed power and balance with acidity as a welcome foil’

AVA (American Viticultural Area), which achieved average to slightly above-average yields in 2021. Winemaker Molly Lonborg (pictured, p71) said: ‘It was a low yield vintage overall in the region, but with their 20-year-old vineyard, [owners] the Tillman family has been working hard to identify areas that are underproducing and remediate those things, including cutting back diseased wood and laying down new vine canes.’

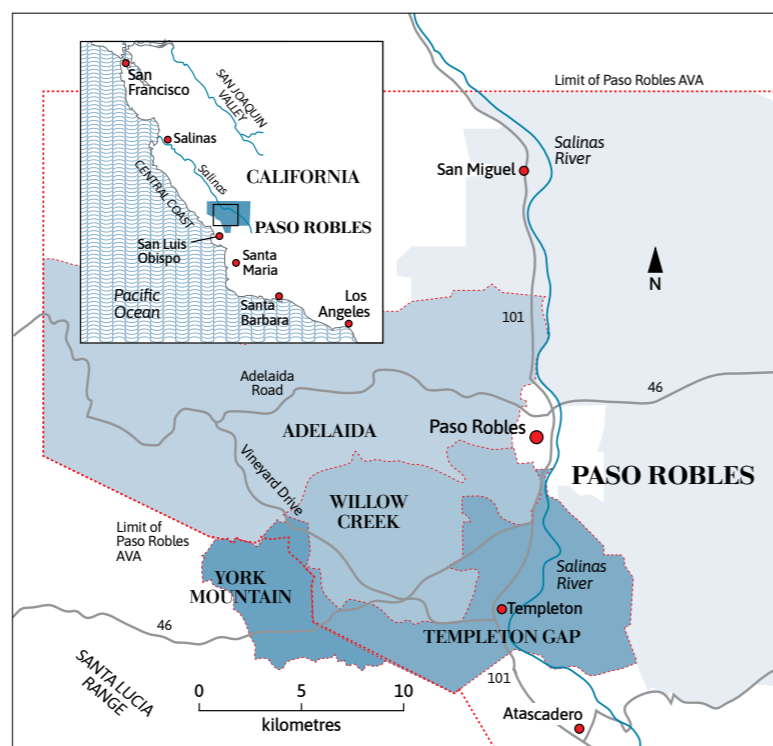
DEALING WITH DROUGHT

Established in 1983, Paso Robles, meaning ‘pass of the oaks’ in Spanish, is a region with 16,500ha under vine, making it a sizable player in California [by comparison, Napa Valley Vintners records the planted area for the whole of Napa Valley, further north, at about 18,600ha]. Significant temperature variances ranging from 2°-10°C in a day allow the grapes to refresh at night and retain acidity. The growing season is extended due to these diurnal swings. That, coupled with regular late rains, allows grapes in the region to benefit from more hang time, resulting in wines with mature, ripe fruit characters as well as strong acidity.

In 2021, most of the 11 sub-AVA districts in the Paso Robles region were in year two of drought, with the bulk of the season’s rain falling in a single late-winter storm. Drought can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, drier years lead to less leaf growth and small grapes with more concentration, higher skin-to-juice ratio, and thus a higher concentration of phenolic compounds, all conducive to winemaking. On the other, the yields are low, and winemakers are left wishing they had more fruit.

Stephan Asseo of LAventure Winery says of his limestone soils in the context of drought: ‘Limestone is like a big sponge and is able to absorb all the moisture from the winter. We have a better ability to resist drought than those with better-draining soils.’

Being in the second year of drought is desirable, as vines are under a fair amount of stress but not excessively stressed, following a first year in which they were already restricted in their resources and thus gave lower crops. But in year two, vines are not so deep in the drought cycle that they start to shut down development altogether.



Paso Robles: know your vintages

2020 ★★★★★☆

A difficult vintage from all sides, including drought, dramatic heat spikes and smoke from nearby wildfires, coupled with pandemic-related stressors, including facemasks. Widely mixed quality, depending on the producer. Not all producers made wine due to smoke taint or potential smoke taint issues from wildfires.

2019 ★★★★★★

An excellent vintage on all accounts. The 2019 growing season and the harvest were ‘perfect’, with many reports of it being ‘one of the best’ and ‘favourite’ vintages in recent history.

The wines are dense, structured, powerful and will be very long-lived.

2018 ★★★★★★

A desirable, long growing season crafting wines that are classic, structured and intense in fruit. Wines with firm tannins and ageing potential. A strong, powerhouse vintage.

2017 ★★★★★☆

A hot and wet vintage with record-setting rain in January. A warm summer with a late August heat spike that slowed maturing, causing a later start to harvest for many. The wines are drinkable earlier with freshness and lifted fruit.

‘The wines are fresh, bright and focused in style, but with a richness’, comments Justin Smith of Saxum – that richness resulting from the small drought-affected berries. ‘I admit I was ever so slightly underwhelmed when I tasted the wines in barrel in the beginning,’ he continues, ‘but they’re really growing on me.’ Smith describes 2021 as ‘a sleeper vintage’. Aron Nevarez (pictured, opposite), vineyard manager and head viticulturist for prized brands such as Denner and McPrice Myers, is similarly enthusiastic about the vintage’s potential: ‘Out of the past seven vintages, 2021 is one of my favourite years.’

PICK OF THE SUB-AVAS IN 2021

Almost 10 years ago, 11 nested AVAs within the greater Paso Robles AVA were approved for use on labels. Conjunctive labelling laws, which have seen success in Napa Valley, require ‘Paso Robles’ to be used on a label whenever a sub-AVA is also listed.

The western Paso regions seem to run ahead of the pack, with many quality producers residing in that area. These areas can be slightly cooler, wetter and windier than their eastern neighbours, and see the marine fog from the coastal influences. The wines from these areas tend to show higher acidity, a key piece of the quality puzzle in Paso to balance the fruit concentration, tannins and alcohol levels that can result from the high temperatures.

ADELAIDA

Home of top-quality Paso wine, Adelaida is the westernmost of the sub-districts and closest to the Pacific ocean. At its closest point, Adelaida lies just less than 10km from the coast, with the Santa Lucia Range mountains in between the two. The average rainfall in Adelaida is generally the highest in the Paso region, at 635mm per year, and in 2021 the bulk of the rain came from one late-winter storm. Tablas Creek reported 330mm of rainfall that year, with 300mm coming from that one storm. The Adelaida district boasts the highest elevation in Paso, up to 670m. Says Molly Lonberg at Alta Colina: ‘Because of our high elevation, we have a lot of high-intensity fruit, a lot of colour and a lot of tannin.’ Soils are limestone dominant with water-retaining properties and give the ability to retain freshness and acidity in the wines.

WILLOW CREEK

Just south of Adelaida lies Willow Creek, a high rainfall, high elevation sub-district with similar properties. J Dusi Wines, a legacy Paso producer, has been farming the Paper Street vineyard, which straddles Adelaida and Willow Creek, for close to 10 years. The vineyard is planted to head-trained Zinfandel with cuttings from the Dusis’ century-old Dusi vineyard. ‘It’s tasting great. I’m really enjoying the fruit aspect that’s coming out of it – almost like a darker, shadowy fruit, yet bright,’ says Janell Dusi, owner-winemaker at J Dusi. ‘Because of the drought, the fruit is front and centre and focused.’ As in the Paso region as a whole,



J Dusi Wines



Molly Lonberg, Alta Colina



Aron Nevarez, Denner and McPrice Myers

drought and coolness were the biggest factors of the 2021 vintage. ‘Cool’ is a relative term in Paso, referring to no major or extended heat spikes, as were seen in 2020 (two weeks or more of temperatures above 40°C).

TEMPLETON GAP

The coolest sub-district in Paso, defined by a ‘gap’ in the hills, allows cold marine fog from the Pacific, dubbed the ‘fog monster’, to penetrate and push into the region. Between the Pacific ocean and the region of Paso Robles lie the Santa Lucia mountains which, apart from the Templeton Gap, prevent the cool maritime winds and fog from reaching the wine region. The downside to the high winds is that ‘shatter’ or coulure can plague the vineyard. Shatter is a specific, short window during flowering in which the flowers do not pollinate, causing grape clusters not to fully mature. Both Aron Nevarez (Denner, McPrice Myers)

and Janell Dusi saw this in 2021 in their Templeton Gap vineyards due to higher-than-normal winds. Extended hot temperatures can also cause shatter.

YORK MOUNTAIN

York Mountain is a separate AVA within San Luis Obispo County that abuts the western edge of Paso Robles. Established in 1983 and one of the smallest AVAs in California at 2,600ha, it is cooler, wetter and foggier than the AVAs of Paso because the Santa Lucia Range does not protect it as much from the oceanic influences. York Mountain soils are predominantly well-draining, heat-retaining sandstone rather than limestone, a good combination for this cool and wet area, which boasts 30%-50% more rainfall than Paso. Jordan Fiorentini of Epoch Estate calls 2021 ‘a winemaker’s vintage where we could wait to pick the fruit until we felt it was time, without too many climatic factors getting in the way’.

Cohen's pick of Paso Robles: 30 standout wines from 2021

① Tablas Creek, Esprit de Tablas Blanc, Adelaida District 94

POA £ Liberty Wines
The Esprit line features flagship blends from the best lots on Tablas Creek's regenerative organic-certified estate vineyard: rich stone fruit, tropical fruit and beeswax notes on the nose. The palate is rich, typical of a Roussanne-dominant white. Stone fruit and pineapple notes on the palate with a mineral character running through the heart. The ultimate food-friendly white with a masterful balance of freshness and depth. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alcohol** 13%

② Saxum, James Berry Vineyard White, Willow Creek 93

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
The white sibling from the celebrated James Berry vineyard. A complex nose of ripe pears, citrus blossom and an exotic saffron note. Mouthwatering acidity and waxiness up front, green fruits in the middle and lactic notes rounding up the rear. Complexity shines through from the Grenache Blanc and Roussanne blended with Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay. Demands food for supreme enjoyment. This 2021 vintage will be released in spring 2024. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 15.7%

③ Denner, Theresa 92

US\$55 dennervineyards.com
A Roussanne, Grenache Blanc and



Justin Smith, Saxum

Marsanne-based white Rhône blend from Denner, one of E&J Gallo's latest acquisitions (announced in November 2022). Beginning with sweet orange citrus, apricot and white flowers on the nose, then the palate is rich, full and weighty, and there's a lengthy finish to round out this purely Paso expression. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 14.1%

Saxum, James Berry Vineyard Red, Willow Creek 96

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
This is the flagship Grenache-based estate red from this esteemed Paso Robles producer. The nose opens with plumminess, cherry notes, and fruit purity that shines through to the palate: bold, showy, serving

dark fruits, a liquorice note and sweet toasted oak. The James Berry vineyard showcases potential realised in Paso Robles with expertly balanced structural elements. To be released in spring 2024. **Drink** 2023-2041 **Alc** 15.5%

④ Booker, Fracture, Willow Creek 95

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
The Booker flagship wine shows pronounced aromatic intensity, leading with black fruits, cured meats and graphite notes, a herbaceous menthol note on the palate and moderate tannins. The wine is broad-shouldered and assertive, with no question of its ageability. The acidity, tannins, alcohol level and fruit concentration signify a long life ahead in the bottle. **Drink** 2023-2041 **Alc** 14.7%

⑤ Daou, Estate Soul of a Lion, Adelaida District 95

£150 JN Wine
Not yet released, this full, voluptuous and complex wine will only improve with age. The fruit is dominant now, but tertiary notes are emerging. Aromas of dark berries and blackcurrants are confirmed on the palate, plus mocha and black liquorice notes; the medium tannins will continue to integrate with age. Complex, lengthy finish. A long life ahead, yet it will be ready to drink upon release. **Drink** 2023-2041 **Alc** 15.2%

⑥ L'Aventure, Estate Cuvée, Willow Creek 95

£120 Champagnes & Châteaux
The L'Aventure vineyard (pictured, p68) is one of the top sources of quality fruit in Paso, and this wine is no exception. Aromas of dark, jammy fruit dominate, and the fruit on the palate is equally assertive, with healthy doses of cedar and spice. Tannins are muscular and powdery, which will aid in the ageability – a full-bodied, authoritative Paso wine with quality at the foundation. **Drink** 2023-2036 **Alc** 14.9%

Saxum, Broken Stones 95

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
This Syrah-dominant blend gives a dark and stormy nose with notes of blackberry, black pepper and black liquorice. The palate is dark, rich and complex, with firm tannins and a long finish. Rich fruits and figs dominate, with sweet vanilla and cinnamon spices and a lengthy, dark chocolate finish. **Drink** 2023-2036 **Alc** 15.5%



The Daou Family Estates tasting room building, just west of Paso Robles city

Saxum, G2 Vineyard, Willow Creek 95

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
Saxum has been working with the G2 vineyard since 2014, and this Grenache-dominant 2021 blend embodies the phrase 'iron fist in a velvet glove', in its restraint combined with power. It reveals notes of dark cherry fruit on a shy nose, complemented by hints of cedar and toastiness. The palate is a well-integrated study on precision, with an interplay of dark currant and plum fruits, cinnamon and black pepper, all completed by sweet oak spice. **Drink** 2023-2036 **Alc** 15.9%

Tablas Creek, Esprit de Tablas, Adelaida District 95

POA £ Liberty Wines
The Esprit line features flagship blends from the best lots on Tablas Creek's organic-certified estate vineyard, which is farmed according to the principles of regenerative viticulture. An earthy nose with brighter highlights, floral violet aromas and fresh blackberry fruits. The palate shows equal parts fruit and spice: a well-balanced, very drinkable red Rhône blend that is the benchmark for this style in Paso. **Drink** 2023-2041 **Alc** 13.5%

L'Aventure, Côte à Côte, Willow Creek 94

£110 Champagnes & Châteaux
While this is the flagship GSM blend from L'Aventure, it is the more 'delicate' offering in the producer's portfolio – a word not often used in Paso. Red and black fruits intertwine on the nose, then the palate is chewy and textured with flavours of red fruits, baking spices and faint floral notes. A lengthy finish rounds out this beauty. **Drink** 2023-2036 **Alc** 14.9%

⑦ Adelaida, Signature Viking Estate Cabernet Franc, Adelaida District 93

adelaida.com
A stellar example of a New World Cabernet

Franc from organic certified producer Adelaida Vineyards, showcasing varietal typicity. The nose opens with typical bell pepper and blueberry Cabernet Franc character. The palate displays a decisive tannin backbone plus dark fruits and earthiness. To be released in October 2024. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 13.8%

Booker, Oublié, Willow Creek 93

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
A Grenache-based blend from the Rhône-focused estate owned by Eric and Lisa Jensen. Red and black fruits on the nose, peppery and heaps of spice. The palate is rich, fruit-driven, smooth and luscious. A big, rich Paso Rhône blend done right. The most food-friendly wine of the Booker portfolio that would easily pair with many dishes. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 14.5%

⑧ Brecon Estate, Reserve Mourvèdre, Adelaida District 93

US\$88 breconestate.com
A single-vineyard Mourvèdre clone from the Glenrose vineyard. Dark and brooding fruit on the nose, toasted oak and spice notes. The palate is hyper-balanced with the dark, ripe fruit and spice notes wrapped with a bow. Squarely New World in nature with its fruit dominance. A persistent and warming finish. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 14.8% ▶



9 **Calcareous Vineyard, Devil's Canyon Syrah, Adelaida District** 93

calcareous.com
A fruit-dominated Syrah expression with blueberry and blackberry coulis aromas. The palate shows intensely concentrated blue and black fruits with good acidity, leaving the palate feeling refreshed. To be enjoyed with grilled or roasted meats, or as a meal unto itself. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 14.5%

10 **Caliza, Kän-krët Grenache, Willow Creek** 93

US\$75 calizawinery.com
'Kän-krët' is a phonetic pronunciation for the word 'concrete'. The intention with ageing in concrete here is to highlight the purity of the Grenache fruit, which this wine achieves on both the nose and the palate with bright red fruit, and specifically notes of cherry. Minerality and spice prevail, as does a freshness throughout due to its marked acidity. This is a wine that could easily be enjoyed now, but it will also reward cellaring, certainly improving and evolving with age. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 15%

Dracaena Wines, Plummer Vineyard Reserve Cabernet Franc 93

dracaenawines.com
Single-vineyard Cabernet Franc sourced from the Plummer vineyard. Concentrated red fruits on the nose, a hint of black fruit. Spice dominates, including black pepper and cinnamon. The palate is concentrated yet precise. Dark fruits, dark chocolate and liquorice notes, well-integrated tannins, long and complex finish: a quality example. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 14.3%



Calcareous Vineyard in Adelaida, close to the Pacific



Thacher winery and tasting room opened in 2008

Epoch, Syrah, York Mountain 93

epochwines.com
Epic Syrah from female winemaker Jordan Fiorentini. Textbook Syrah notes of pure concentrated black fruits and cracked black pepper. A mineral graphite note permeates. Restrained use of new oak keeps the wine pure and in balance. York Mountain influence (high elevation, cooler climate) can be felt throughout. To be released in 2024. **Drink** 2023-2036 **Alc** 15%

11 **Giornata, Il Campo Rosso** 93

£24-£27 NY Wines, The Vineyard Dorking, **Vino Wines**
A value-priced Italian 'table red', attractive, drinkable and food-friendly wine. Sour-cherry red fruits and dried thyme herbs on the nose. The palate is framed with acidity and a hint of rusticity, perhaps a hat-tip to the Old Country. A straightforward wine fit for any table. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 13%

12 **J Dusi, Paper Street Zinfandel, Willow Creek** 93

jdusiwines.com
Another stunner from the Dusi family, fourth-generation Paso Robles growers, and this time it's from their more recent project: the high-elevation Paper Street vineyard. This is a lighter and brighter Zinfandel expression than the Dusi Vineyard, but still squarely California Zinfandel in character. Red fruits, blood orange notes, black pepper and baking spices with an acid backbone and a lengthy finish. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 15.2%

L'Aventure, Optimus, Willow Creek 93

£75 Champagnes & Châteaux
This flagship blend of Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot was Stephan Asseo's raison d'être to leave France and make wine in California. Blueberry compote on the nose, which evolves into dark and brooding fruit on the palate. The fruit is ripe yet precise, a signature of Paso. Tannins are prevalent in this full-bodied wine, but will soften and integrate with age. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 14.8%

Law Estate, Beguiling, Adelaida District 93

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
A Grenache-dominant blend from the certified organic producer Law Estate, this offers cranberry-style red fruits and rose petals on the nose. The primary-focused palate is full of juicy berry notes plus spice to ground the wine with a touch of earthiness. The lighter side of Paso that would benefit from a slight chill. To be released in August 2024. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 15.4%

Best of Paso Robles

In addition to the 30 wines shown here, you can discover 45 more wines from the highly rated 2021 Paso Robles growing season, tasted for Decanter by Brianne Cohen and all scoring 90pts or higher. Simply visit decanter.com/premium



Law Estate, Sagacious, Adelaida District 93

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
A Rhône red blend that succeeds in giving the best of each variety. Grenache pushes to the forefront, with Mourvèdre and Syrah contributing blackberries and bramble to the equation. This organically certified wine demonstrates restraint, and is among the best Paso can offer. To be released in August 2024. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 15%

13 **McPrice Myers, Beautiful Earth Cabernet Sauvignon** 93

mcpricemyers.com
A varietally correct and precise warm-climate Cabernet Sauvignon, dominated by blackcurrants and cassis, deep spice, a herbaceous menthol note and green bell pepper rounding out the nose. All is confirmed on the palate, other than the pepper. The wine of choice for a simple grilled steak dinner. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 14.8%

14 **Turtle Rock, Claude's Cuvee,**

Willow Creek 93

US\$80 turtlerockvineyards.com
Based in Tin City, an urban tasting zone and makers market, Turtle Creek sources grapes from the most esteemed vineyards in Paso. This Syrah-dominant blend leads with black fruit notes, meatiness and cracked black pepper on the nose. The tannins are at the forefront, but will integrate with time. The fruit is ripe, compote style, and in line with the other structural elements. Full-bodied with a lengthy finish. A barrel sample was tasted. **Drink** 2023-2036 **Alc** 15.5%

Bodega de Edgar, Gran Reserva, Willow Creek 92

bodegadeedgar.com
A stunning Tempranillo from this Mexican-American-owned Paso winery, featuring fruit from Dusi-owned Paper Street vineyard. Pure red fruit on the nose, plus spice notes of clove and cinnamon, which are echoed on the palate, along with mocha notes emerging at the back, recalling its Rioja inspiration. Fresh, balanced and approachable. To be released in August 2024. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 15.5%

15 **My Favorite Neighbor, Cabernet Sauvignon** 92

POA £ Four Corners Wine Co
Eric Jensen of Booker crafts MFN wines in homage to his favourite neighbours with grapes sourced from his favourite vineyards. A varietally correct Cabernet Sauvignon gives fresh-cut green pepper on the nose that gives way to a herbaceous, minty note. The palate brings black fruits, strong chalky tannins and a leather note. Precise, with

each structural element and flavour at attention. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 14.5%

Tablas Creek, Patelin de Tablas 92

POA £ Liberty Wines
Slang in French for 'neighbourhood', the Patelin wines are approachable and value-driven. This SGM-based blend also includes a dash of Counoise 'for complexity'. Charming red fruit nose of cherries and plums, black pepper and a hint of spice, then a cleansing and refreshing palate that's acid-driven, with blue fruit notes and delicate spice. What a light-handed Paso red can do. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 12.5%

Turley, Dusi Vineyard Zinfandel 92

turleywinecellars.com
A Zinfandel sourced from the 80-year-old Dusi vineyard. On the nose, the red fruit notes are bright. The palate displays unexpectedly marked tannins alongside concentrated fruit and a strong backbone of acidity. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 15.9%

16 **Thacher, Cinsault, Adelaida District** 91

US\$27.60 birdrockfinewine.com
A rare varietal bottling of Cinsault from family-owned and operated Thacher Winery, showcasing the lighter side of Paso. The nose brings bright Bing cherries, a faint floral note and earthiness, followed by a lifted, acid-driven palate. This is demure and exceptionally food-friendly, and would sing with a slight chill. Proof that quality does not need to be heavy-handed in the glass. **Drink** 2023-2024 **Alc** 12% **D**



PHOTOGRAPHS CHRIS LESCHINSKY, CHAZ ROBERTS, STARS AND STRIPES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, MAP MAGGIE NELSON