

# Tablas Creek Unites the *Spirit of France* with the *Terroir of California*



Photos provided by Tablas Creek.

## By Katy Budge

The idea that became Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles began with a friendship, the friendship between noted fine wine importer and marketer Robert Haas and the Perrin family of France's famed Chateau de Beaucastel and La Vielle Ferme. They began to wonder what would happen if French Rhône varietals were grown in California and crafted into Chateauneuf-du-Pape style wines according to principles developed at Beaucastel — not so earth-shattering a concept until you take it to the level that Haas and the Perrins were prepared to go.

"We started taking the idea seriously in about 1985," remembered Haas, "and we decided we wanted to taste wines from areas where Zinfandel had been grown. Not that we wanted to grow Zinfandel, but climatic wise, we thought those were the areas we were looking for. We also thought that since we were using Beaucastel as a model, we might as well try to get as close to the soils as possible." However, this meant that the group was searching for high pH soils, a soil type not commonly found in California.

Not surprisingly, the Zinfandel factor led Haas and the Perrins to the Paso Robles area, which has a long history of Zinfandel production. The climate was appropriate, but what about the soils? That question was answered one day by a simple glance out a car window.

"We were driving along Peachy Canyon Road," said Haas, "and we saw the visual — the chalk road cuts." So began the search for vineyard land that would have that same soil. However, Haas and the Perrins didn't want to just purchase an established vineyard, they wanted to create their vision from the ground up. "They (the real estate agents) all thought we were crazy," laughed Haas. "We wanted poor soil, inclines, hills ... Here we are looking to plant a vineyard, but we didn't want a vineyard!" The search ended in 1989 when Haas and the Perrins discovered a 120-acre parcel on Adelaida Road on Paso's westside. They brought in a French expert to analyze the soils, and, sure enough, they measured from 7-8.5 pH. Tablas Creek Vineyard had a home.

"We had tasted and looked for property for about four years," said Haas, jokingly adding that, "if I'd done my homework in geology, we would have saved ourselves the trouble." After Tablas Creek was established, Haas was doing some homework for a talk he was preparing. To his pleasant surprise, he unearthed a scientific study discussing the "Geology of Upper Cretaceous and Lower Tertiary Rocks near Lake Nacimiento, California." What that wordy title boiled down to, explained Haas, is that the soils of the Tablas Creek property weren't just similar to those of Beaucastel — they had exactly the same geologic origin.

With the cornerstone of their Tablas Creek vision in place, Haas and the Perrins turned to the next piece of the puzzle — grapevines. They knew they wanted to grow Rhône varietals, specifically Mourvedre, Syrah, Grenache Noir, Counoise, Roussanne, Viognier, Marsanne, and Grenache Blanc. (The first four are red varietals; the latter four white.) However, in their four years of tasting these wines throughout the state, Haas and the Perrins were somewhat unimpressed with the grapes' final expression in the bottle, especially with the Mourvèdre, Syrah, and Grenache.

"We decided the difference was genetic," said Haas, that the way the vines had evolved throughout the decades from their original French

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**Robert Haas of Tablas Creek Vineyards tasting the 1999 Reserve Cuvee, which received a 90 rating from Robert Parker, and the 2000 Clos Blanc, which received Best in Show at the 2002 Wine Literary Awards.**



**Robert Haas and the vineyards of Tablas Creek.**  
Photo provided by Tablas Creek.

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forebears had affected them in some manner. In response to this, Haas and the Perrins decided to import their own vineyard stock from Beaucastel cuttings rather than relying on American plants. However, because of stringent regulations regarding agricultural transportation of live plants, this meant that any cuttings from France had to spend three years in strict U.S.D.A. quarantine. The first shipment of Beaucastel cuttings arrived in the U.S. in 1990, and the plants were kept in a New York quarantine facility before being released to Tablas Creek for planting in 1993. (Additional shipments followed, with the last scheduled to arrive at the label's Paso Robles estate later this year.)

Originally, Haas and the Perrins had planned to farm out the propagation and development of their vineyard stock to an established nursery. However, they discovered that "as much as 20 percent of material coming out of nurseries was virused," said Haas. "We thought, 'Why go through all this trouble just to end up with virused stock?' So, we had to learn another business." In short, Tablas Creek became not only a vineyard and winery enterprise, but also a high-tech nursery business, growing not only their own vineyard stock, but also developing into a high-quality supplier for a host of other vineyards as well. For their own use, the Tablas Creek nursery is growing some 70-90 different combinations of varieties and clonal types, all of which then get grafted onto one of four different phylloxera-resistant and calcium-tolerant rootstocks.

Armed with the climate and soils they had sought and the vines they imported, Haas and the Perrins turned to the next element of Tablas Creek — the vineyards. Again, they wanted to model their California vineyards on principles established at Beaucastel, which meant organic. "Beaucastel is certified organic," said Haas, and although Tablas Creek isn't officially certified, it is farmed organically, right down to the use of allowing chickens to graze in between the rows to keep the bugs down. "We felt it (farming organically) was certainly better for the environment, and for the land we are going to leave to our kids" explained Haas. "We also believe that grapes grow better in a natural environment."

That commitment to a natural environment led Haas and the Perrins to take what some might consider a bold risk when it came to making Tablas Creek wines. The wines are made using native yeasts, not inoculated with a

pure, cultured strain as many wineries do. "We felt that if what we were going to make was going to be an expression of our terroir," said Haas, "that we had to use natural yeasts, that cultured yeasts would alter the wine and perhaps set the fermentation off in a different direction." It is that same line of reasoning that leads to the use of fairly neutral oak in the winemaking process. "We want to taste terroir, not the barrel," he said, though he added, "As you expand you do need to buy some new oak."

So let's finally talk about the wines of Tablas Creek Vineyard, which is, after all, why Haas and the Perrins embarked on this grand adventure. All the wines of Tablas Creek, as with those of Beaucastel, are blends. Why so, and not just a varietal bottling of Syrah or Roussanne? "I think we make better wines is the short answer," said Haas. "The climate — particularly the climate — and the soils allow us, even invite us, to harvest early and late varieties at optimum conditions. Those varieties complement each other in the wines." The task of blending and crafting the Tablas Creek wines falls predominantly on the shoulders of Winemaker Neil Collins, who has been with the label since its first vintage in 1998.

The 1999 vintage marked the first harvest that Tablas Creek had enough production off its French vines that could be separated out and eventually blended into the 1999 Reserve Cuvee, the much anticipated red wine that made its debut in the Spring of 2002. The French fruit makes up 65% of this wine, which is made up of 40% Mourvedre, 27% Grenache Noir, 23% Syrah, and 10% Cunoise. Though it presents itself as a classic Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape style premium blend, Haas is pleased that it isn't just an identical twin of a Beaucastel wine, but instead exhibits the "very bright fruit" of a California wine grown in a very dry climate. Like many Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape wines and also many wines coming out of the Paso Robles area, it can be enjoyed now or "it will live a long time."

The red Reserve Cuvee has already garnered a lot of attention in wine circles, and similar accolades will no doubt be showered on the white reserve. The 2001 vintage of that blend was just recently bottled and is set for release in October of 2002. Another Tablas Creek white, the 2000 Clos Blanc, recently won Best-in-Show at the 2002 Wine Literary Awards, an honor that proved a pleasant revelation for Haas. "I think we are all surprised by how good the white wines have been," he noted. "Paso Robles had the reputation as not a good place to grow whites. I think that's wrong," he said with a small smile.

Clearly, given all the effort he has gone through to be here, Haas is a firm believer in the Paso Robles area. He unabashedly stated that, "In five years, this will be seen as one of, if not the, best growing areas. The 'trade' sort of always knew that. They bought a lot of quality grapes here for perhaps a third of the price. What the area needed was more local wineries using the grapes, rather than having them exported." By establishing Tablas Creek Vineyard and putting the words "Grown and Bottled on the Estate. Paso Robles" on their labels, Haas and the Perrin family are doing just that, and announcing quite loudly to the wine world just what the words "Paso Robles" mean on a label.