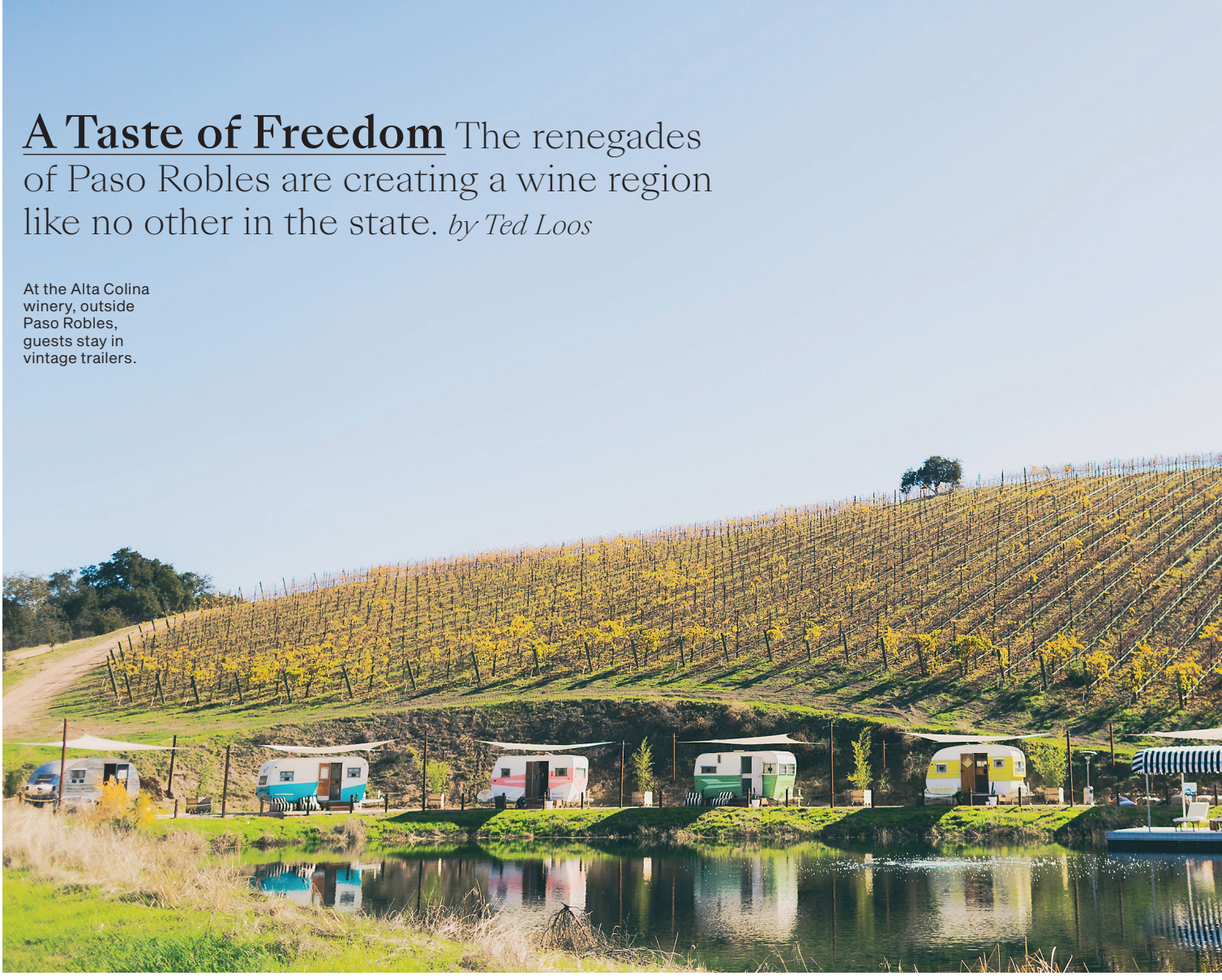
A Taste of Freedom The renegades of Paso Robles are creating a wine region like no other in the state. *by Ted Loos*



At the Alta Colina winery, outside Paso Robles, guests stay in vintage trailers.

COURTESY ALTA COLINA

"WE'RE TAKING OVER the wine world!" shouted Eric Jensen as he careened over a steep, vine-covered hill in a black sport utility vehicle. He was referring not just to his property, **Booker Vineyard and Winery** *(bookerwines.com)*, but to the whole Paso Robles viticultural region, located halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, in the middle of California's Central Coast. Spanning 33,000 vineyard acres in San Luis Obispo County, surrounding the town of Paso Robles itself, the region has earned a reputation for bold experimentation.

"Everybody from Napa wants to be down here," he said of winemaker friends up north. "When you come here, there's not a billionaire owner looking over your shoulder. We have freedom. The cost to do everything is lower."

Jensen, a former concert promoter from Orange County who moved his family to Paso (locals rarely utter the "Robles" part) in 2001 to make wine, is a true believer who goes all-in. He's committed to biodynamic farming and has gotten critical raves for his wines, including his recently introduced My Favorite Neighbor, a polished blend dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon. And he's in the midst of building a new hospitality center, complete with a music-filled underground lounge, set to be completed next year.

He's just the type Paso is attracting more and more of these days. In a dozen years, it has gone from 170 wine brands to more than 250. Winemakers come because Paso allows them independence.

The natural gifts of the area and the relative lack of development make a potent combination. As Maggie Tillman, whose parents, Bob and Lynn, founded the winery **Alta Colina** *(altacolinawines.com)* on a commanding hilltop in 2003, put it: "We can do what we want."

While Rhône red varieties like Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre are the core grapes here, along with Cab, they are hardly the only game in town. Don't count out Tempranillos, especially those from Bodega de Edgar. Or the rarer, but still strikingly good, whites, like the Picpoul from the pioneering and biodynamic Tablas Creek. Or the on-trend, beguiling orange wines from Giornata.

Paso Robles shares the dun-colored hills and majestic live oaks of other Golden State wine regions. But only recently has it been taken seriously enough to be divided into districts within its American Viticultural Area, which means that its distinct terroirs have finally been recognized.

Adelaida and Willow Creek are the two districts where winemakers are producing the most collectible wines. Both are on the West Side, meaning the area

FROM LEFT: CAMERON INGALLS/COURTESY BOOKER VINEYARD AND WINERY; KENDRA ARONSON

to the west of Highway 101, which shoots down through the center of town.

For a decade, the best place to stay in Paso Robles has been **Hotel Cheval** *(rooms from $340; hotelcheval.com),* whose 16 rooms and cozy common areas feature dark wood, stone, and leather accents. By 2021, the hotel will have 20 more rooms across the street, and this fall a new entry—the brick-fronted **Piccolo** *(rooms from $399; thepiccolo.com)*—debuts a couple of blocks away with 24 loftlike rooms. There's also an elaborate Tuscany-meets-Napa fantasy, the 171-room **Allegretto Vineyard Resort** *(rooms from $235; allegrettovineyardresort.com),* on the East Side for people who want amenities like a pool and a spa.

One of the top attractions is Willow Creek's **Saxum Vineyards** *(saxumvineyards.com),* whose Rhône varietal blends have made it a wine-world darling. Winemaker and local hero Justin Smith, who grew up on a nearby ranch among a family of grape growers, built the spare and modern winery in 2016. Designed by the acclaimed firm Lake/Flato, it's made of sleek rusted steel and includes a hookah lounge. (The winery is open for tastings by appointment.)

Tasting through his 12 current wines, Smith did his best to explain the local magic that he harnesses: "What appeals to people about this area is that we can do a ripe, rich wine, but, because of the cool nights, it has a freshness most areas can't provide. That makes Paso, Paso."

What's known as the diurnal shift, the difference between daytime high temperatures and nighttime lows, is particularly large in Paso. The Pacific is only 20 miles away, bringing cold air and the right amount of rain; water-retaining limestone in the soil, the same as in many French winemaking regions, helps feed the vines in summer.

"We can do anything, but I think fundamentally we're about the red blend," said Smith. The proof of that is in Saxum's own fresh and juicy Terry Hoage Vineyard 2017, a Grenache-Syrah blend.

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As Smith noted, "It would be boring if the wines from here all tasted the same," and they sure don't. Some of the best are being made by **Thacher Winery** *(thacherwinery.com),* located in the farthest-west reaches of the area. Whereas many local wineries flirt with the "How big is too big?" question, owner-winemaker Sherman Thacher is more interested in picking the grapes a bit early, which helps him craft beautifully balanced, lower-alcohol wines.

Given the quality of wines in Paso, there are surprisingly few excellent dining options. You're likely to find local winemakers congregating at the **Hatch Rotisserie & Bar** *(hatchpasorobles.com),* which serves haute comfort food. But in general, "the food scene has not held up its end of the bargain," said chef Ricky Odbert, who is doing his best to change that with **Six Test Kitchen** *(sixtestkitchen.com).* Having previously cooked and served dinner in his father's garage, the tasting-menu specialist now has a gleaming ten-seat space.

Odbert's stated goal is to get two Michelin stars, and he and his crew of four are well on the way, with exquisitely executed dishes that rely on classic principles. But each one pushes just past convention, like his tiny, perfectly crusted chicken-liver pie covered with slices of gleaming red Santa Rosa plums.

When Odbert, who may just be the best chef between Malibu and Palo Alto, offhandedly remarked that his new space "just gives us more room to do our thing," he could have been speaking for all the makers calling Paso home.

From left: Winemaker Eric Jensen of Booker Vineyard and Winery; dishes from the Hatch Rotisserie & Bar.