

Paso Robles a treasure trove of intriguing stories

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A framed jacket immediately draws the eye when you walk into the downtown Paso Robles tasting room of D'Anbino Vineyards & Cellars.

Anyone who has ever seen "Laverne and Shirley" would probably recognize Carmine Ragusa's bright blue jacket with yellow-braided "The Big Ragoo" embroidered on the back.

"Is it real?" my husband wonders aloud.

Winemaker and D'Anbino co-owner Carmine Rubino chuckles. "The actor, Eddie Mekka, gave it to me because he said, 'You're the real Carmine.'

"All of this," he gestures to a room filled with an impressive collection of music and Hollywood memorabilia, "sat in my garage until the kids got it into their heads to incorporate it into the tasting room."

Good call on their part.

It's hard to imagine how Paso Robles wineries survive in a wine country region saturated with more than 160 vintners. Hard, that is, until you stop and take some time to get to know the people behind the wine labels.

The secret to success in Paso Robles? Everyone has an extraordinary story to tell. A trip here becomes as much about discovering those stories as it is about sampling some of the most diverse varietals in California.

Hitting the right notes

Rubino and his nephew John D'Andrea grew up like brothers in Newark, N.J., where they fostered a love of music that eventually took them West.

Both built storied careers, D'Andrea as a singer, musical director and producer; Rubino as a recording engineer. Their story and success is documented in the tasting room through the autographed celebrity photos and gold and platinum albums lining the walls, the two Emmy statues in a lit display case and the stage where their all-family band frequently plays to a packed house.

D'Andrea and Rubino landed in the wine business when a realtor showing them area property suggested they try growing grapes.

"'You don't have to know anything about it. You don't need to harvest them yourselves,' he told us," Rubino recalls. "You just cash the big check."

That's not exactly how it turned out. Before long, family members were in the fields and making their own wine. The family band — complete with saxophonist, drummer, guitarist and more — inspired the wine label.

Live music has become a tasting room staple, with several events each month ranging from swing lessons to wine and music pairings. The "D'Anbino Storytellers" night is also popular as D'Andrea and Rubino share memories from their music days and stories about celebrities they've met, including John Lennon and Joe Pesci. "The first time," Rubino says, "we only got through one year."



More than 40 different wine grape varieties are grown on about 26,000 acres of vineyards in the Paso Robles wine country. (Photo by Ann Tatko-Peterson/Contra Costa Times) (Ann Tatko-Peterson)

Among their top wines are *Orchestration*, a syrah blend with cabernet and petite sirah, and *Quadrasonic*, a cabernet sauvignon blend with cabernet franc, merlot and syrah.

Also check out their one-of-a-kind bar, designed from the inner workings of three spinet pianos.

Coast to coast

The prestige of downtown tasting rooms has grown this year with two newcomers — Kiame Wine Cellars and Clayhouse Wines.

In April, co-owners Greg Johnson and Aram Deirmenjian opened Kiame in the historic Granary Building, once a flour mill.

The winery has quickly grabbed attention with its smooth R'Own and Kuvée blends. Of special note is the R'Own, which adds 8 percent zinfandel to the typical Rhone varietals of syrah, grenache and viognier.

"Hence the name," says co-owner Greg Johnson. "We had to be different, and now we've had a lot of people want to use the name."

But the wine isn't the only thing setting Kiame apart from its neighbors. Deirmenjian grew up on Paso Robles grape farms with his family before eventually traveling to New York. There he met Johnson, who had experience in wine retail and real estate, and family ties dating back to the turn of the century (his grandfather bought a 12-story 5th Avenue building for \$100 in 1906).

Both seemed like lifetime New Yorkers, until the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"After that, it became about quality of life," Deirmenjian says.

They started looking for land in 2003. And six years later, "we're well on our way," Johnson says.

Another newcomer

Clayhouse Wines is well on its way, too, after opening its downtown tasting room in January.

Like its contemporaries, Clayhouse has a few interesting stories to tell, starting with its name — coined because of a 150-year-old adobe structure that sits among the Clayhouse vines at Red Cedar Vineyards.

The winery's history dates back to the 1890s, when the Middleton family started as Pacific Northwest cedar farmers, making boxes for grape farmers. From there they delved into table grapes and eventually the winemaking business.

"They had permits to cut their cedar crop on a Monday," said sales manager Kari Kittinger. "But the Friday before, the federal government stepped in and said, 'You can't do it.' They had waited 50 years for that crop. So, the federal government paid them for it."

With that money, what would eventually lead to Clayhouse Wines had begun.

The family's roots as table grape farmers shows in their wines, particularly its Adobe White, which includes 22 percent Princess — that's a table variety grape that gives the Adobe White a polished finish. The chenin blanc in the Vineyard Series also is distinctive with a touch of sweetness. But the Estate Series selections are the specialties, featuring full-bodied wines from grapes grown on the vineyard's terraced hills.

The tasting room has an intimate feel but is large enough to host Friday Night Flights that pair food and wine.

Winery with a view

For a truly intimate tasting, try Terry Hoage Vineyards, nestled in the hills a few miles from downtown.

Deer lounge along the road leading up to this small vineyard, where the husband-and-wife team of Terry and Jennifer Hoage has planted 17½ acres for a small-lot production of 2,200 cases a year. The winery is so small that tastings are by appointment only.

The view alone, of wildflowers set against a backdrop of rolling vineyards, makes this a worthwhile stop. And once again I'm charmed by the story behind the winery, perhaps this time, in part, because of my former life as a sports writer.

Terry Hoage played 13 years in the NFL, winning a Super Bowl with the Washington Redskins after the 1991 season and spending 1993 with the San Francisco 49ers.

The Hoages were living in Phoenix when he retired from football and Jennifer set out to find a home for her two grade-school children.

"My son is physically handicapped," Jennifer says, "and I wanted to find a community that would be accepting."

Driving through the Paso Robles vineyards, she knew she had found their home. The winemaking part came later, in 2002 when Terry got "hooked," Jennifer explains. "We made wine in the garage with a two-year-old plant and it came out pretty good. We knew we had something here."

The Hoages' lives intersect with their wines, whose names are double-entendres: "The Gap" cuvee blanc (for shooting the gap in football and the Templeton Gap in the wine region) and the "Skins" grenache (for the Redskins and skins of the grape).

"The Hedge" syrah is their flagship wine, but the "5 Blocks" cuvee with its complex and smooth finish really packs a punch.

Beyond the wine names and one cabinet of memorabilia from Terry's playing days at the University of Georgia, you won't find many telltale signs of the Hoages' previous life. Instead, your eye is drawn outside to a fire pit surrounded by Adirondack chairs and a natural pond with rows of vines serving as a backdrop.

Here, as at so many of the area's wineries, what you find is an intriguing story, a stunning view and one more reason to delve deeper into Paso Robles' wine country.

D'Anbino Vineyards and Cellars: 710 Pine St., Paso Robles; 805-227-6800; www.danbino.com. Open 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Fridays-Sundays. \$5-\$10 tasting fee depending on event.

Kiame Wine Cellars: 1111 Riverside Ave., Suite 102, Paso Robles; 805-226-83333; www.kiamewines.com. Open 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Thursdays-Mondays. \$5 tasting fee.

Clayhouse Wines: 849 13th St., Paso Robles; 805-238-7055; www.clayhousewines.com. Open 11 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. \$5 tasting fee. Friday Night Flights 4-7 p.m. for \$15 per person.

Terry Hoage Vineyards: 870 Arbor Road, Paso Robles; 805-238-2083; www.terryhoagevineyards.com. By appointment only 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Fridays-Sundays. \$10 tasting fee.

MORE INFO: Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance at www.pasowine.com.

Upcoming event: Harvest Wine Weekend, Oct. 16-18. More than 130 Paso Robles wineries host harvest events, winemaker dinners, vineyard and winery tours and more. Details: www.pasowine.com.