

Paso Robles: It's not just about the wine

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Buy a highlight map of Paso Robles attractions and most of what you will see are wineries. That doesn't mean non-wine lovers can't find plenty to fill a day visit there.

This city is truly the heart of San Luis Obispo County's wine country, but olive groves, excellent restaurants and a quaint downtown add a layer of diversity to Paso Robles.

Different tasting

Among the Far Out Wineries, a grove of more than 9,000 olive trees surround a charming wooden building that houses an olive press in the back and a country-style tasting room in the front. The Yaguda family had operated a Paso Robles ranch for more than 15 years, but it wasn't until importing a top-rate press from Italy in 2005 that Pasolivo became the region's leading producer of estate-developed extra virgin olive oil. The family grows, handpicks, crushes, bottles and labels all of its oils on site.

The Yagudas never planned to have a tasting room, says owner and manager Joeli Yaguda, but visitors kept coming. Now complimentary tastings are offered Thursdays through Mondays.

Visitors get a small bag of bread, then have the oils poured into tasting cups from stainless steel dispensers set along a tasting bar. The straight-up varieties include California (blending mission and manzanillo olives) and their signature Pasolivo (a Tuscan blend that includes Frantoio, Leccino and Moraiolo), ranked in the top 10 worldwide for pure olive oils.

Pasolivo staff members also add special seasonings to oil samples to see how the flavors can be enriched. My personal favorite: black lava sea salt in the signature oil.

The tasting room also samples flavored oils (the Meyer lemon is exceptional), a tapenade made with the Pasolivo oil, and a Confiott d'Olives Vertes, a jam-like treat that tastes as sweet as apple butter.

Ask to see the press, too. It's amazing to think such a small machine can press 104 tons of olives — one ton per hour.

In addition to the tastings, Pasolivo is an education in all things olives, with a tasting wheel and descriptions of the 12 varietals grown on the ranch. "We can get as geeky about this as anyone wants us to be," Yaguda says.

The most interesting tidbit I learned is that olive oils costing less than \$6 and bearing an "Imported from Italy" label are most likely defragranced hazelnut oil from Turkey blended with a little olive oil.

Browse or shop

If Pasolivo doesn't satisfy your olive cravings, head downtown. We Olive has an extensive collection of California olive oils, with as many as 20 available for tasting at one time.

From there, you will find enough shops to fill a few hours of browsing and buying.

Notable businesses include Studios on the Park, featuring nine studios where you can watch 24 artists working and a showroom where their art is on display; Powell's Sweet Shoppe, with classic candy such as wax lips and Beeman chewing gum, classic sodas and real Italian gelato; and Di Raimondo's Italian Market, with an array of specialty cheeses.

And be sure to leave at least a half-hour to explore the Great American Antiques Mall. Antiques and collectibles from 32 vendors fill more than 6,000 square feet of space. Items for sale range from vintage buttons and baseball cards to old-time gas station pumps.

Museum minute

If you have the kids in tow, after leaving the antique mall, head nearby to the Children's Museum at the Paso Robles Volunteer Firehouse.

Exhibits here are all hands-on, ranging from a ball pit designed to simulate a grape stomp, a fire station with a truck children can climb on, the El Mercado shopping center and an arts and crafts center.

For visitors of all ages, the Pioneer Museum documents the area's history, and the Estrella Warbird Museum in east Paso Robles has a collection of military aircraft as well as a display devoted to automotive history and automobile racing.

Dine time

Plan your trip to Paso Robles to include both lunch and dinner. The restaurant choices here are abundant.

Spots such as Artisan, Villa Creek and Bistro Laurent are well known and well regarded.

Unable to decide among so many choices, we asked the locals for recommendations. That's how we landed at Chico's Cafe for dinner. Upon arriving we were distracted by a neighboring restaurant's menu. Ultimately, we stuck with Chico's, and as we entered, one local diner quickly quipped, "You made the right choice."

Indeed, the dÃ©cor was simple but my chicken fettuccine with broccoli and my husband's clams linguine in a wine sauce were delicious. Better still, the bill was under \$50, tip included.

Buona Tavola was another winner with its authentic Northern Italian cuisine. Thomas Hill Organics also came highly recommended for dishes prepared from ingredients produced on their own farm — one reason why the menu changes weekly.

For lunch, Panolivo was our favorite. The French bakery and restaurant serves fresh salads, tasty sandwiches and panini, tapas and homemade soups. It's open for dinner only Fridays and Saturdays, but for lunch daily.

If the weather permits, order your lunch to go and walk a block to the Paso Robles park. It is amply shaded with more than two dozen trees and has plenty of picnic tables and benches. The park also has a large gazebo, a playground, horseshoe pits and a barbecue area.

Quaint streetlights also make this a nice spot to stroll after dinner, putting a perfect cap on a full day in Paso Robles.

- WHERE TO STAY: La Bellasera Hotel and Suites, 206 Alexa Court, Paso Robles; 805-238-2834; www.labellasera.com. The luxury boutique hotel has 60 rooms or suites, some with fireplaces and patios, a pool and fitness center. Rates start at \$229.
- WHERE TO EAT: Buona Tavola, 943 Spring St.; 805-237-0600; www.btslo.com.
- What to do: Olive tasting "" Pasolivo, 8530 Vineyard Dr.; 805-227-0186; www.pasolivo.com; 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Sundays; free tastings.
- Downtown shopping "" We Olive, 1311 Park St.; 805-239-7667; www.weolive.com; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sundays.

Studios on the Park, 1130 Pine St.; 805-238-9800; www.studiosonthepark.org; noon-6 p.m. Thursdays and Sundays, noon-10 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays.

Powell's Sweet Shoppe, 840 11th St.; 805-239-1544; www.powellssweetshoppe.com; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Sundays.

Di Raimondo's Italian Market, 822 13th St.; 805-238-1268; www.pasocheese.com; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Sundays.

Great American Antiques Mall, 1305 Spring St.; 805-239-1203; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily.

- Museums "r Children's Museum of Paso Robles, 62313th St.; 805-238-7432; www.pasokids.org; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesdays, Saturdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays; \$7 adults, \$6 ages 1-13, \$5 ages 65 and older.

Pioneer Museum, 2010 Riverside Ave.; 805-239-4556; www.pioneermuseum.org; 1-4 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays; free.

Estrella Warbird Museum, 4251 Dry Creek Road; 805-227-0440; www.ewarbirds.org/index.html; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, noon-4 p.m. Sundays; \$10 adults, \$5 ages 6-12; \$8 students and ages 60 and older.

- MORE INFO: Paso Robles Chamber of Commerce at www.pasorobleschamber.com; San Luis Obispo County CVB at www.sanluisobispocounty.com; and Main Street Association Downtown Paso Robles at www.pasoroblesdowntown.org.