

Vines in the wild

Sample Paso Robles, the Central Coast's up-and-coming wine region

By Matthew Jaffe

Photographs by Randy Leffingwell

En route to Justin Vineyards & Winery, Vineyard Drive twists beneath oak trees laced with Spanish moss. The road passes ranchland and rows of vines heavy with grapes as it heads deeper into the Santa Lucia Mountains and the backcountry of the Paso Robles wine region.

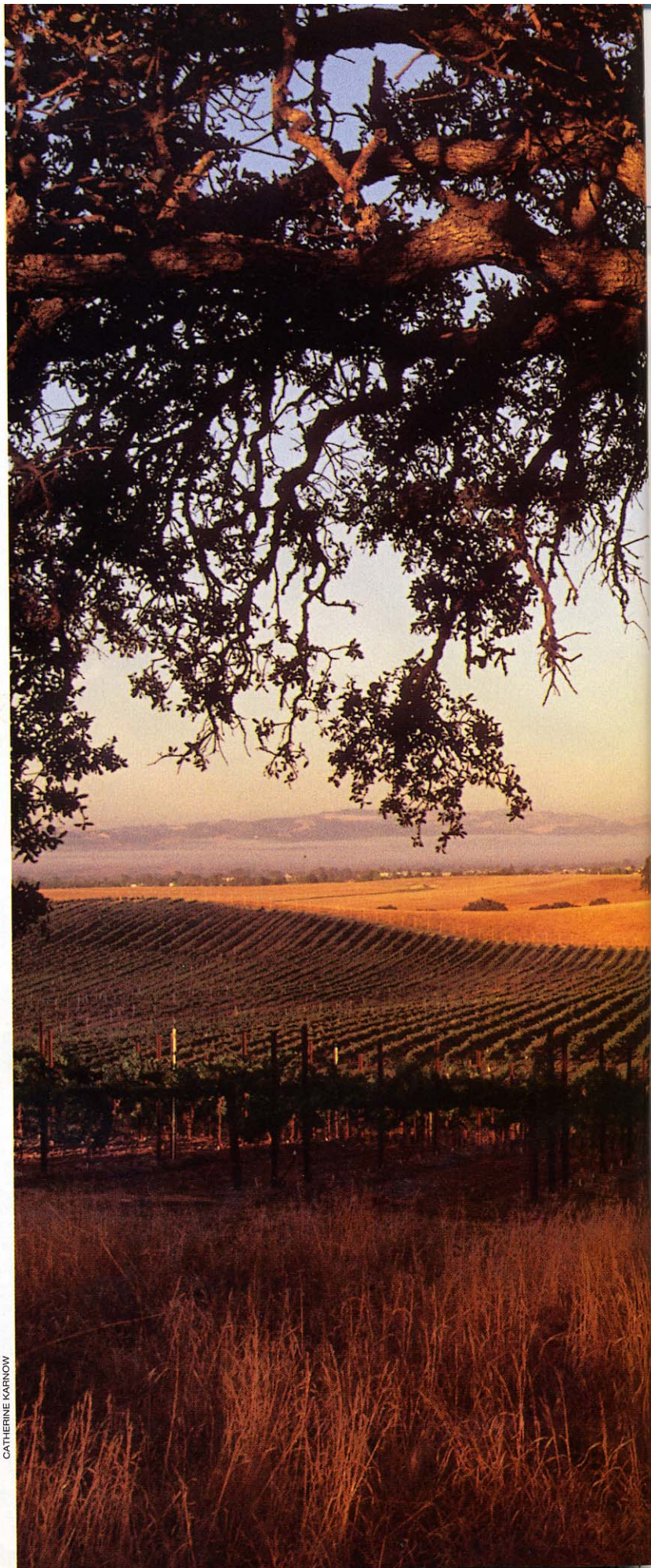
Justin Vineyards & Winery is a cluster of contemporary, farm-style buildings set among vineyards on the edge of an oak woodland. Its five-table restaurant, **Deborah's Room**, is softly lit and warmed by a stone fireplace. Dinner is a journey through the Paso Robles landscape, only culinary—with an emphasis on local ingredients and Justin wines. Above one table, a letter from the White House lauds Justin's 1997 Isosceles Bordeaux blend—served at a state dinner in 2000—for its “seductive, almost gushing fruit and gorgeous structure.”

As we leave, the waiter issues a warning seldom heard at sophisticated restaurants: A couple miles from the winery, look out for the bobcat in the road. That's where he likes to sit.

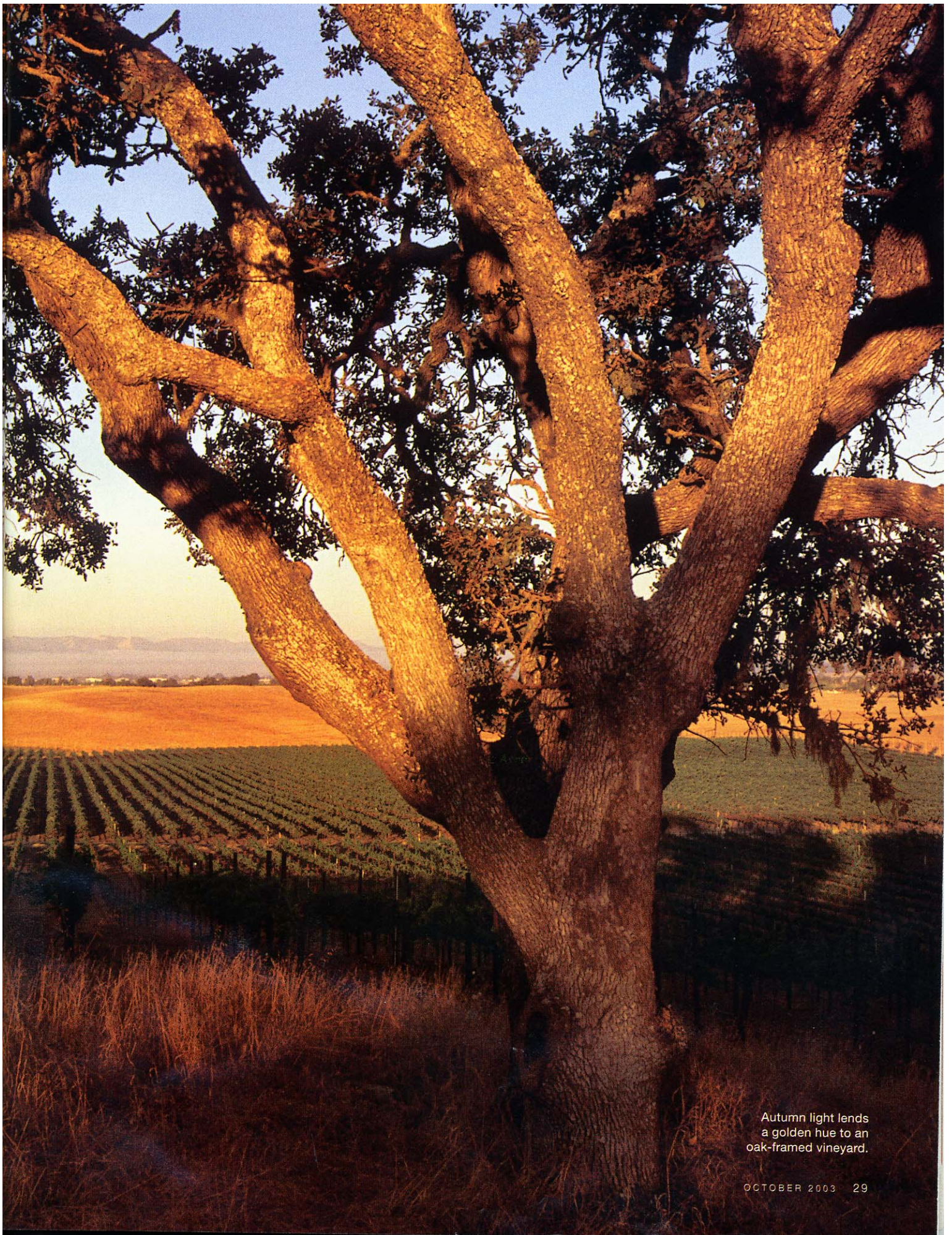
And so we go slowly down the dark, winding road. The bobcat isn't sitting there; instead, an enormous great horned owl suddenly swoops over the truck's hood.

The night captures the contrasts of the Paso Robles region, where wine-country elegance blends with old California ruggedness to create a destination equal parts gourmet and rustic.

(Continued on page 32)



CATHERINE KARNOV



Autumn light lends
a golden hue to an
oak-framed vineyard.

Wine as a way of life

Until recently, Paso Robles was largely undeveloped as a wine region; cattle were raised here, not Cabernet. But the area's viticultural tradition is among California's oldest. Wine grapes were grown at nearby Mission San Miguel Archangel starting in the 1790s. Commercial operations began in 1882, when Andrew York, founder of **York Mountain Winery**, planted vineyards on a mountain near today's State 46. And after spending time in the area to treat his rheumatism, the great pianist and Polish freedom fighter Ignacy Jan Paderewski bought a ranch here and planted acres of Zinfandel and Petite Sirah grapes.

York and Paderewski were onto something. The sprawling Paso Robles appellation encompasses numerous climatic zones. Annual rainfall varies from 10 to 40 inches, and summer temperatures can range 60 degrees in a single day. Plus, with several earthquake faults in the area, there is considerable variation in soil types. Add it all up, says Ken Volk, founder and director of winemaking at **Wild Horse Winery & Vineyards**, and you have something special.

When Volk arrived in 1981, there were just 11 bonded wineries here in San Luis Obispo County. Now there

are more than 80 in the Paso Robles appellation alone. "This is the sleeping giant of California fine wines," he says. "There's not much land left to plant in Napa. But there's still accessibility here, and people can afford it. Like it or not, the Central Coast is the future of fine wine in California."

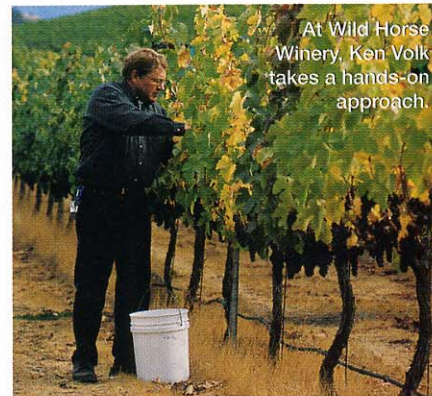
When Volk began making wine, he crushed grapes with a baseball bat and a trash can. These days, Wild Horse is the area's third-largest winery; it was recently acquired by Peak Wines International, a subsidiary of Jim Beam Brands Worldwide. While 80 percent of Wild Horse's sales come from 4 of its 30 wines, Volk has also planted more than a dozen rare heirloom grape varieties.

"I enjoy working with different grapes," Volk says. "I would hate to see the heirloom varietals just disappear. And it's like cross-training. Those grapes help us make a better Chardonnay too."

Where elegant meets rustic

With 22,000 acres now in production, the Paso Robles wine industry has literally transformed the local landscape. In formerly open pastures, rows of vines stand out against golden hills backed by the dark ridgeline of the Santa Lucias.

The transformation has affected local



At Wild Horse Winery, Ken Volk takes a hands-on approach.

culture as well. Paso Robles is now home to fine restaurants like chic **Bistro Laurent** and a growing number of food-oriented businesses.

And these days, not only can you dine well here, you can also sleep in style. A decade ago it would have been hard to envision **Villa Toscana Bed & Breakfast** in these parts. The Tuscan-style inn at **Martin & Weyrich Winery** has cloistered walkways, a campanile, and huge rooms with hardwood floors and rough-hewn-beam ceilings. But for all its posh trappings, the inn is part of a working California winery, with rooms looking out over vineyards.

On an overcast morning, the inn is quiet, but the winery is bustling. The crush has begun. Winemaker Alan Kinne walks us through the facility, describing the science behind the transformation of raw grape juice into wine.

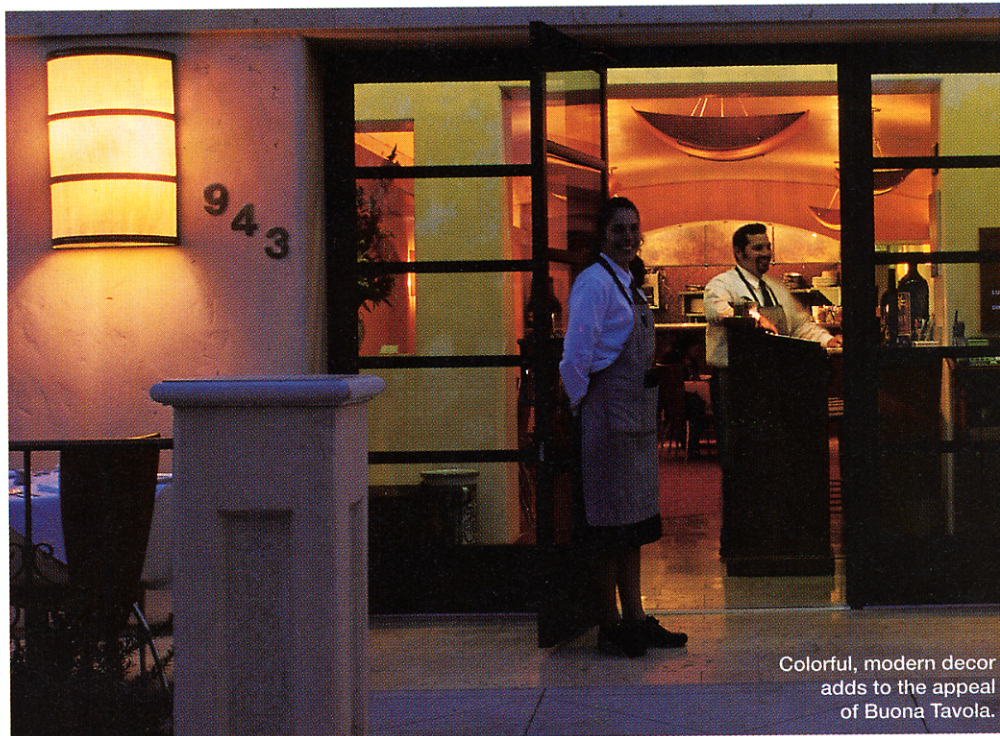
"There's a big debate over whether winemaking is an art or a craft," says Kinne, a onetime literature and philosophy major. "But the human touch makes all the difference. We're still using some of the same techniques that people used 2,000 years ago."

That night at the restaurant **Buona Tavola**, some local vintners are having their first tastes of a dessert wine produced at their winery. Talk about gushing and seductive: Their more studied comments are repeatedly interrupted by gasps and exclamations and congratulatory clinks of glasses—leaving little doubt that whether art or craft or science, winemaking in Paso Robles has become both a passion and a way of life.

(Continued on page 34)



Taste the latest at Martin & Weyrich Winery.



Colorful, modern decor adds to the appeal of Buona Tavola.

Paso Robles planner

Paso Robles is about 230 miles north of Los Angeles (roughly halfway to San Francisco) on U.S. 101. For more information, contact the **Paso Robles Chamber of Commerce** (www.visitpasorobles.com or 800/406-4040) or the **San Luis Obispo County Visitors & Conference Bureau** (www.sanluisobispo.com or 800/634-1414).



Exploring the wine country

The 2003 Paso Robles Harvest Wine Tour (Oct 17-19) features events at area wineries. The **Paso Rob-**

les Vintners and Growers Association (www.pasowine.com or 805/239-8463) publishes a free winery guide.

For a taste of the area's offerings beyond wine, visit **Templeton's Certified Farmers Market** at Sixth and Crocker Streets (9-12:30 Sat; 805/239-6535).

Paso Robles wine country sprawls both east and west of U.S.

101, with State 46 as its axis. Here are some of our favorite wineries.

East of U.S. 101

Eberle Winery. Cave tours and a deck overlooking vineyards. *North side of State 46, 3 1/2 miles east of U.S. 101; www.eberlewinery.com or (805) 238-9607.*

Garretson Wine Company. Some of the region's best Rhône varietals. *2323 Tuley Ct., Ste. 110; www.mrvignier.com or (805) 239-2074.*

Martin & Weyrich Winery. Known for Cal-Italia varietals. *2610 Buena Vista Dr.; www.martinweyrich.com or (805) 238-2520.*

Tobin James Cellars. Old West stylings, including a 135-year-old bar. *8950 Union Rd. (off State 46), 9 miles east of U.S. 101; www.tobinjames.com or (805) 239-2204.*

Wild Horse Winery & Vineyards. Known for Pinot Noir and rare heirloom varietals. *1437 Wild Horse Winery Ct. (off Templeton Rd.), Templeton; www.wildhorsewinery.com or (805) 434-2541.*

West of U.S. 101

Carmody McKnight Estate Wines. Farmhouse in an idyllic setting. *11240 Chimney Rock Rd.;*

www.carmodymcknight.com or (805) 238-9392.

Justin Vineyards & Winery. English gardens add to the appeal of one of Paso's top wineries. *11680 Chimney Rock; www.justinwine.com or (805) 237-4149.*

L'Aventure Winery. Open only by appointment, but worth a stop for the Bordeaux-style wines. *2815 Live Oak Rd.; www.aventurewine.com or (805) 227-1588.*

Peachy Canyon Winery. Known for Zinfandel. *1480 N. Bethel Rd., Templeton; www.peachycanyon.com or (805) 239-1918.*

York Mountain Winery. Has its own appellation. *7505 York Mountain Rd., Templeton; www.yorkmountainwinery.com or (805) 238-3925.*

Dining

Bistro Laurent. One of Paso's best restaurants. Its Le Petit Marcel cafe is open for lunch on the restaurant's patio. *Closed Sun. 1202 Pine St.; (805) 226-8191.*

Buona Tavola. Northern Italian spot filled with artwork. *Lunch Mon-Fri, dinner daily. 943 Spring St.; (805) 237-0600.*

Deborah's Room. Prix fixe menu based on local ingredients. *Lunch Sat-Sun, dinner daily (reservations required). At Justin Vineyards & Winery; (805) 237-4149.*

McPhee's Grill. Popular local eatery. *Lunch and dinner daily, Sunday brunch. 416 S. Main St., Templeton; (805) 434-3204.*

Lodging

Paso Robles Inn. Some of the 100 rooms have hot mineral baths. *From \$105. 1103 Spring; www.pasoroblesinn.com or (800) 676-1713.*

Summerwood Winery & Inn. Country-style inn with gorgeous garden and nine rooms overlooking vineyards. *From \$195. 2130 Arbor Rd.; www.summerwoodwine.com or (805) 227-1111.*

Villa Toscana Bed & Breakfast. Luxurious eight-room inn set on a working winery. *From \$340. 4230 Buena Vista; www.myvillatoscana.com or (805) 238-5600. ♦*

