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Many have linked Paso Robles to the town of Healdsburg in Sonoma County. Each has a small, intimate downtown, a variety of wine tasting rooms and restaurants that make them culinary destinations.

A tale of two wine-centric cities

By JANIS SWITZER
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In articles in publications such as *Sunset* magazine and *The New York Times*, Paso Robles has been compared to the upscale Sonoma County town of Healdsburg. And a number of the new winery owners and winemakers in Paso Robles have said they were attracted to the city because of its similarities to Healdsburg.

So on a trip to Sonoma County last week, I was more than a little curious about how the towns really compare.

Healdsburg is about 75 miles north of San Francisco. It sits in the middle of an area flanked by the Russian River, Alexander Valley and Dry Creek Valley wine regions. With about 100 wineries in a 20-mile radius, it has been a wine destination for more than two decades, and in the past 10 years it has become known for its urban-chic restaurants, trendy



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downtown galleries and upscale hotels.

The similarities to Paso Robles are immediate once you enter the central downtown area. With tree-lined streets leading up to a main park, Healdsburg's downtown square is remarkably similar to that of Paso Robles. Only one square block, it is half the size of Paso Robles' downtown, but the feel is the same, and the stores that surround the park are small, intimate and welcoming.

Twelve years ago, during my last visit to Healdsburg, there were still stores that sold boots and auto parts in the downtown square. Today there is a Ralph Lauren shop, a high-end cookware store, multiple jewelry

shops and art galleries, and the gourmet food mecca Oakville Grocery.

Like Paso Robles, there are multiple wine tasting rooms and wine shops downtown. At last count in Paso Robles the total was 11, the same number that exists in Healdsburg today. As in Paso Robles, there are a number of small, highly acclaimed restaurants downtown. In Healdsburg, *Bistro Ralph* is one that was operating on my last visit. Others, such as *Zin*, *Cena Luna*, and *Manzanita*, have helped cement the town's reputation for being a culinary destination, just as *Bistro Laurent*, *Artisan* and *Villa Creek* are doing in Paso Robles.

And then there's the *Dry Creek Kitchen*. Owned by famed restaurateur *Charlie Palmer*, this restaurant and the hotel he founded with it, the *Hotel Healdsburg*, put the town on the map six years ago when they

opened.

Which leads to where Paso Robles and Healdsburg differ. It is not so much in content, but in timing. Look at Healdsburg today, and it's easy to see Paso Robles in the near future — with a few notable differences.

Healdsburg is a one-night trip for most. The hotel choices are still limited, with most visitors (who can't afford the \$500-a-night *Hotel Healdsburg*) choosing from dozens of bed and breakfasts. Though farther from a metropolitan area, Paso Robles already has more hotel rooms than Healdsburg, with better quality choices, thanks to the opening in the last year of *Hotel Cheval*, *La Bellasera*, *La Quinta* and the new *Marriott*.

And while Paso Robles doesn't yet have a celebrity-owned hotel, there are a number of projects in the planning stages that include

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spas, conference facilities and restaurants.

"I've always said what the region really needs is a destination property," said Stacie Jacob, executive director of the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance. "That's what's going to take us from where we are today to where we need to be tomorrow."

Jacob also visited Healdsburg recently and sees potential for Paso Robles, as well as reasons to be cautious.

"If we just look at what is happening here, and where Napa and Sonoma already are, there's a lot of potential for Paso Robles to continue to grow," she explains. "But

a concern for a lot of people is 'How much is too much?'"

One issue that Paso Robles already is grappling with is parking. Healdsburg merchants say this isn't a problem there.

With time restrictions of one to two hours in the main square and the adjacent blocks nearby, parking in Healdsburg is reserved for customers. There are no meters, but the limits are enforced. Store employees park in a large parking lot two blocks off the square, which also has longer-term parking for hotel customers.

Another notable difference between Paso Robles and Healdsburg is cost. Even average hotel rooms in Healdsburg cost about 50 percent more than in Paso Robles.

Restaurants are expensive, and wine lists are downright exorbitant. The corkage fee in Healdsburg averages about \$30 — twice that of most Paso Robles restaurants. When it comes to value for your dollar, Paso Robles offers every bit of Healdsburg quality, for about half the price. Hopefully it will stay that way for a long time.

Whether Paso Robles ever gets a Ralph Lauren shop or a celebrity chef, it is clear that the city is in the midst of change, and if managed well, it will be good for winemakers and residents alike.

"A lot of people recognize that the timing is right now, and you have to take the opportunity and run with it while you can," Jacob said.