

# Latest Releases from Paso Robles and San Luis Obispo County

By Jeb Dunnuck  
August 10th, 2017

The good news keeps rolling in with the latest 2014s and 2015s from Paso Robles and San Luis Obispo County.

This report focuses on the wines from these two regions (which include the primarily Pinot Noir and Chardonnay regions of Edna Valley, Arroyo Grande, and Monterey), though also includes wines from Santa Barbara County and a few other regions in California. For more California coverage, readers should check out the "Santa Barbara County: The Classic 2014s and Variable 2015s" article published last week.

2015:

The 2015 vintage proved to be an interesting vintage marked by the fourth straight year of drought. Much like in Santa Barbara County, the vintage started off early, though moved into a cool, windy spring that decimated fruit set and caused most estates to see a drop of anywhere from 30-50+% in yields. This tough start was followed by an uneven, dry, yet humid growing season that alternated between hot and cold spells. One of these spells brought a whopping three inches of rain in July, which is unheard of for this region. To a degree this rejuvenated the vines from the intermittent hot and dry weather, nevertheless, in total the vintage still saw less moisture than average. Harvest started in September and occurred under consistent, even weather allowing winemakers to wait and harvest at will.

Given that 2015 was a drought year – with tiny yields – you would expect the style of the wines to be big, rich and concentrated. However, like in Santa Barbara County, that's not the case. On balance, the 2015s are reminiscent of a cooler year as they show fresher, more elegant characters, with lighter colors, moderate tannins, and good concentration. After four years of drought and an uneven growing season, the vineyards were stressed to the max which meant the defining challenge of the vintage was to achieve even and consistent fruit ripeness. Those who waited to harvest and opted for gentle extractions in the cellar made the best wines. Those that harvested early and pushed for color and extraction produced firm, edgy wines that lack balance and show a distinct dry edge to their tannin.

In short, 2015 is a fresher, elegant vintage that could be thought of as a hypothetical blend of a cool year like 2011 and a warmer, drought year like 2013. While not at the level of 2012, 2013 or 2014, it surpasses 2011 and 2009.

My favorite quote from the vintage comes from Saxum's Justin Smith: "It was a crazy f#\*king year!"

2014:

The 2014 vintage is a classic! The earliest vintage on record at the time (until 2015) and the third straight drought year, this vintage was early, even, and hot – however, the nights remained cool. The key vintage challenge was the compressed harvest time that had everything ripening at the same time. Due to the drought, yields were down, so as in 2015s, don't hold off on buying the top wines as there's not much out there. Also note that Grenache is the star of the vintage, however, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Zinfandel all did well.

The resulting wines are concentrated and plush, with broad, sexy personalities that make them a joy to drink. And while they have loads of material and richness they also have beautiful purity of fruit and ripe, polished tannins that impart an elegant lightness on the palate. The clear majority will benefit from a year or three in bottle, and evolve nicely given their balance. In short, 2014 is a great vintage for this region. It's one that's on par with 2013, and that surpasses 2015, 2012, 2011, 2010 and 2009. If you're a fan of Paso Robles, don't miss these 2014s!

Past Vintages:

A quick look at recent vintages would place the 2013 and 2012 at a very high level. Both vintages were early, dry and can be viewed as classic vintages for the region. Climatically, 2011 would be just the opposite as the vintage was a consistently cold, damp, and all around a difficult year. 2010 was another cooler year, but one that also featured heat spikes

later in the year.

#### 2013 Vintage

2013 was a hot, dry vintage that was both earlier – and hotter – than 2012. However, there were no heat spikes and winemakers handled the heat better than in 2012, due in part to better canopy management in the vineyards. These are beautiful, concentrated wines with notable purity and freshness. For the most part, these wines are still infants.

#### 2012 Vintage

The 2012 vintage was also a hot, dry year that featured high yields, consistently hot temperatures and a few challenging heat spikes later in the year that affected Grenache and Pinot Noir more than Syrah. For the most part, this was an even, easy vintage for the region. The wines are open knit, ripe and heady with plenty of tannic grip hiding under their fruit. Like 2013, this is a terrific, classic vintage for the region. While the wines are still young, they're just now starting to open back up and drink nicely.

#### 2011 Vintage

The 2011 Vintage was as cold a vintage as they've seen, going back over two decades. There wasn't a single day over 100 degrees for the entire year, yet the autumn was dry and cool which allowed growers to wait, and wait, and wait, to harvest ripe fruit. Several estates didn't wrap up harvest until mid to late November. As I said on release, there's been far too much negative press on 2011 and Paso Robles is an undeniable star for California in the vintage. The wines don't have the sheer wealth of material found in 2012-2014, yet they have good ripeness, beautiful complexity, and elegant, balanced profiles that will appeal to more European palates. I think these are beautiful wines that are drinking nicely today.

#### 2010 Vintage

The 2010 Vintage was another cool (until 2011, it was the coldest on record), challenging and stressful vintage. July and August were both downright cold, and several growers shed canopy only to have that approach backfire horribly when intense heat waves came through later in the year. However, the Rhône varieties weathered the hardship admirably and harvest occurred under moderate, even temperatures, with no rain events. I actually love these wines, and they have a cool-climate-like character in their aromatics and purity, yet are concentrated and ripe. Like 2011, there's a hint of Europe to these wines as they show good tannin and acid balance. Now pushing 6-7 years of age, these are still adolescents, yet most are drinking nicely today.

#### The Tasting Notes

These wines were tasted during my trip through the region in June, followed by numerous follow-up tastings at my office in Colorado.

Jammy blackberry, currants, smoked meats and chalky minerality all give way to a concentrated, rich, beautifully pure red that has loads of Syrah character.

A blend of 50% Syrah, 40% Mourvèdre, and 10% Grenache, the **2016 Maturin** saw 20% whole cluster and aging in 100% new French oak. Cassis, crushed rock, peppery herbs and crushed flowers all define this ripe, gorgeously textured, killer red. It has lots of salty minerality on the finish, lots of elegance and a great, great finish.

A blend of 80% Syrah and 20% Grenache from Cruse Vineyard, which is on the western edge of the appellation, the **2016 Name TBD** offers lots of blue fruits, hints of vanilla, scorched earth and blueberries in a ripe, structured, and tannic personality.

Tasted as a fine blend and Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre dominated cuvée, the **2016 Willows Cuvée** is gorgeous. Blackberry jam, lots of flowers, violets and peach pit notes flow to a ripe, balanced, fresh style that's immensely drinkable.

Fermented and brought up all in new 300-liter barrels, the **2015 G2 Vineyard** is perfumed and aromatics, with lots of cherry, blackberry, cured meats, olive and pepper., It's elegant, silky and polished on the palate, with fine tannin.

Made from equal parts Syrah and Monastrell, all from James Berry Vineyard, the **2015 Maturin** offers lots of plum, violets, blueberry and spring flowers, to go with a ripe, sexy, fruit forward style. It has way more texture than most 2015s, and I suspect will shine right out of the gate.

A new cuvée based on a 60/40 split of Grenache and Mourvèdre (20% whole clusters, from a younger site planted 8 years ago, the **2015 Plum Orchard (Name is TBD)** is made in an elegant, silky, and seamless style, with complete notes of kirsch, incense, white pepper, orange peel and dried flowers. Silky and polished, with terrific balance, it's going to drink nicely for a decade.

A blend of 46% Grenache, 34% Syrah, 15% Mourvèdre and the rest Tempranillo, the **2014 Willow's Creek Cuvée** is the finest to date from this estate. Reminding me of a Châteauneuf du Pape (Pierre Usseglio's Cuvée Mon Aieul to be precise) with its kirsch, garrigue, dried herbs and cured meat aromas and flavors, this beauty is full-bodied, supple, and textured, with a great mid-palate and sweet tannin. Drink it over the coming decade.

The **2014 Maturin** comes from a Grand Cru site, James Berry Vineyard, and is equal parts Syrah and Mourvèdre brought up in barrel. It offers lots of black and red raspberry, peppery, roasted herbs and licorice, full-bodied richness, sweet tannin, lots of chalky minerality, and a great finish. It's a decadent, ripe, incredibly sexy red to drink through 2024+.

I loved the **2014 G2 Vineyard**, and this Syrah dominated cuvée (there's 5% Mourvèdre) offers beautiful freshness as well as textbook Paso Syrah notes of blackberries, barbecue smoke, scorched earth and pepper. Reminding me of an Hermitage from Chapoutier, it has full-bodied richness, serious purity of fruit, and present, yet ripe tannin. This is a blockbuster effort that might flirt with perfection at maturity and is a world class Syrah from an up and coming vineyard! Website: [www.turtlerockvineyards.com](http://www.turtlerockvineyards.com)

ULTIMA TULIE WINES	2015	CHARDONNAY	SANTA MARIA VALLEY	\$38	WHITE	89
ULTIMA TULIE WINES	2014	SYRAH GRENACHE	CENTRAL COAST	\$45	RED	90

Coming from the Bien Nacido Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley and aged 20 months in new and neutral barrels, the **2015 Chardonnay** offers lots of ripe peach, melon and salty minerality in a rich, nicely concentrated, textured style. It develops hints of brioche and toast with air and is a ripe, sexy, balanced Chardonnay to drink over the coming couple of years.

The **2014 Syrah Grenache** is a blend of 65% Syrah and 35% Grenache aged 27 months in 50% new French oak. This floral, juicy red has lots of sweet fruit, a seamless, elegant texture, brambly, floral and spice-driven aromatics and a clean finish. Drink is anytime over the coming 5-6 years. Website: [www.ultimatulie.com](http://www.ultimatulie.com)

VILLA CREEK	2015	WHITE	PASO ROBLES WILLOW CREEK	\$NA	WHITE	91
VILLA CREEK	2015	GARNACHA	PASO ROBLES	\$NA	RED	92
VILLA CREEK	2015	WILLOW CREEK CUVÉE	PASO ROBLES WILLOW CREEK	\$NA	RED	94
VILLA CREEK	2015	AVENGER	PASO ROBLES	\$NA	RED	95
VILLA CREEK	2015	HIGH ROAD JAMES BERRY	PASO ROBLES WILLOW CREEK	\$NA	RED	92

VILLA CREEK	2015	SYRAH SLIDE HILL VINEYARD	ARROYO GRANDE	\$NA	RED	95
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**Cris Cherry** has made some terrific 2015s which are certainly up with the crème de la crème of the vintage. As in the past few years, these wines see plenty of stems, yet they're nicely integrated and balance by ample fruit.

The **2015 White** checks in as mostly Grenache Blanc, with 10% Roussanne. It offers textbook notes of apple peels, stone fruits, citrus and a touch of minerality in a fresh, clean, beautifully made package. I'd drink bottles over the coming 2-3 years, but I suspect it will keep for even longer.

I always love this cuvée from Cris and his **2015 Garnacha** is another textbook Grenache from these limestone hillsides on the westside of Paso Robles. Light ruby in color and reminiscent of Châteauneuf du Pape from Domaine de Marcoux, it offers beautiful kirsch liqueur, framboise, dried herbs and hints of incense on the nose. Medium to full-bodied, silky and textured on the palate, drink this beauty anytime over the coming 5-7 years.

Made from 70% Grenache, 20% Syrah and 10% Mourvèdre, the **2015 Willow Creek Cuvée** is slightly darker in color (than the Garnacha) and offers more black cherry, pepper, sappy herbs and violet aromas and flavors. Ripe, medium to full-bodied and elegant, with tight, yet polished tannin and nicely integrated acidity, it's a sensational GSM blend that will keep for a decade. I think it's the best vintage of this cuvée to date.

The **2015 Avenger** is a more Syrah dominated cuvée which includes 10% each of Petite Sirah, Grenache and

Mourvèdre. Its deep ruby/purple/opaque color is followed by classic Paso Robles Syrah notes of blackberries, barbecue smoke, peppery herbs and chalky minerality. Opening up with time in the glass, this full-bodied, unctuous beauty has sweet tannin, nicely integrated acidity, and loads of fruit and texture, all while staying balanced, clean and incredibly drinkable. It will benefit from a year or two in bottle and keep through 2027.

The **2015 High Road James Berry Vineyard** (60% Syrah, 20% Grenache and 20% Mourvèdre) is a more elegant, ethereal wine that sports a deep ruby/purple tinged color to go with notions of black raspberries, cedar-like spice, cured meats and herbes de Provence. Medium to full-bodied, elegant and seamless on the palate, with fine tannin, as well as a savoriness that's going to make it shine on the dinner table, give bottles a year, and drink through 2025.

Unquestionably the odd man out in this lineup, stylistically anyways (and certainly not in a bad way), the **2015 Syrah Slide Hill Vineyard** comes from a site in the Arroyo Grande, not far from John Alban's estate, and is 100% Syrah that sees plenty of stems. It offers a meaty, bloody, salty, Syrah-driven bouquet of blackberries, smoked game, olive tapenade and loads of pepper (white and black). This gives way to a rich, supple, unctuous Syrah that has full-bodied richness, sweet tannin, and a distinct meatiness/bloodiness that keeps you coming back to the glass. It's just another terrific, singular wine from this estate to enjoy anytime over the coming decade. Website: [www.villacreek.com](http://www.villacreek.com)