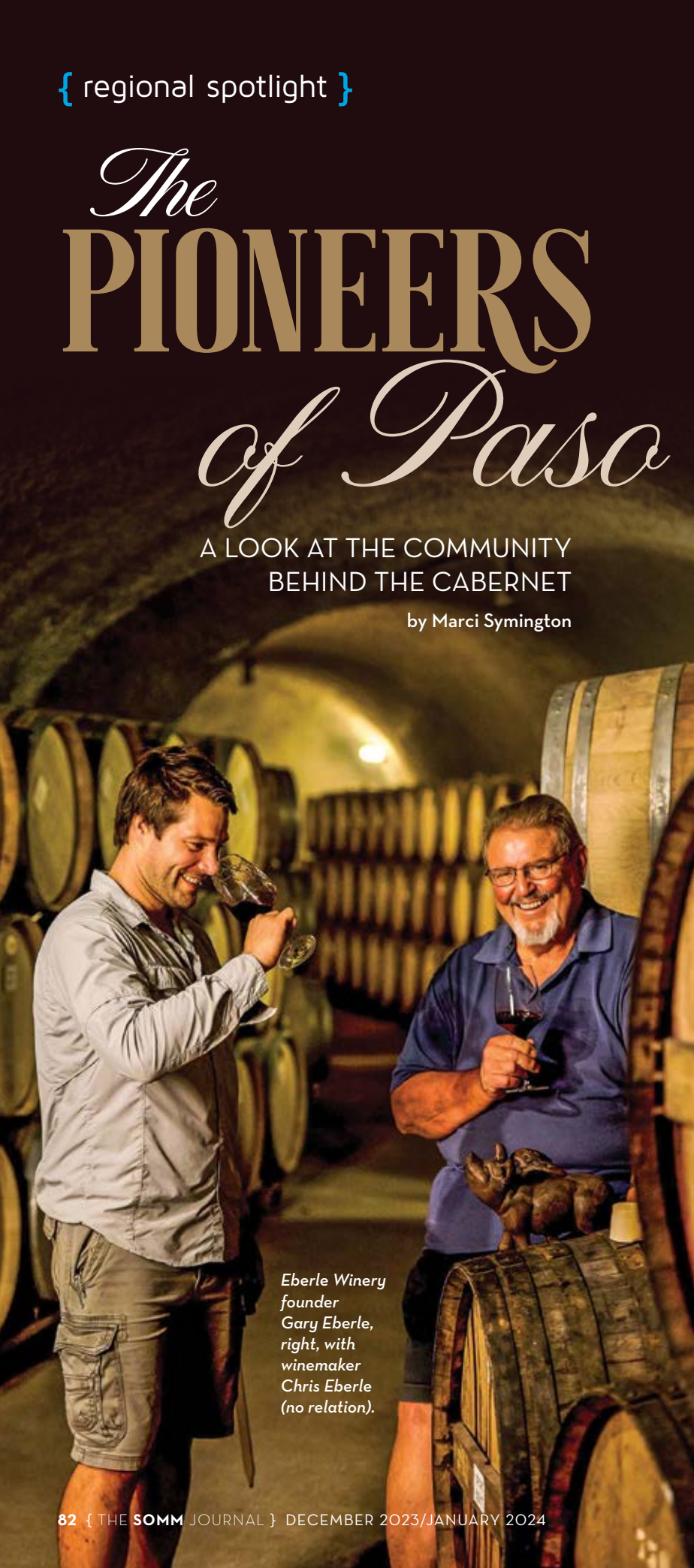


# The PIONEERS of Paso

A LOOK AT THE COMMUNITY  
BEHIND THE CABERNET

by Marci Symington



*Eberle Winery  
founder  
Gary Eberle,  
right, with  
winemaker  
Chris Eberle  
(no relation).*

California has a rich winemaking history dating to the 1700s, when Spanish missionaries established 21 missions stretching from San Diego to Sonoma along the historic El Camino Real and planted grapevines to produce sacramental wine. In the late 19th century, Paso Robles—with its Mediterranean climate, calcareous soils, and high diurnal temperature swings—became a major draw for commercial winemakers, many of European ancestry. In the decades to follow, Zinfandel and Rhône varieties such as Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre would prove to be their calling cards.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s, winemakers like Gary Eberle, Justin Baldwin, and Michael Mooney came to the Central Coast region to plant Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties. These pioneers overcame many hurdles—not the least of which was to educate the public on Paso's location (no, it's not to be confused with the West Texas town of El Paso)—to show the world that California's so-called "Rhône Zone" could also produce world-class Bordeaux blends.

Along the way, they influenced a host of talented individuals who also recognized the area's potential, paving the way for Cabernet dominance. Enter brothers Daniel and Georges Daou, who, after achieving tremendous success in the tech industry, turned their eyes to Paso to realize their lifelong dream of establishing a winery. In 2013, Daniel convinced seven producers to start the Paso Robles CAB (Cabernet and Bordeaux) Collective (PRCC). Joining DAOU Family Estates were J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines, JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery, Adelaida Vineyards & Winery, Eberle Winery, Vina Robles Vineyards & Winery, and Chateau Margene. A grassroots organization whose aim is to raise awareness for the region's Bordeaux varieties and to set the standards for its winemaking, the PRCC now has over 25 members—including a new generation of like-minded producers such as Benom Wines, Copia Vineyards, and Glunz Family Winery, which are helping to raise the bar on quality, innovation, and customer experience. Here, we get acquainted with a few of them.



*Justin Baldwin is founder of JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery.*

## JUSTIN BALDWIN

### JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery

"I like doing things that others haven't done," says Justin Baldwin, founder of JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery. "I was drawn to that pioneering aspect of being one of the early founders and early participants in the Paso wine industry. Nobody, including me, would have guessed it would have enjoyed [such] incredible success."

As an investment banker, Baldwin lived and traveled worldwide before settling in Los Angeles. For his second act, he dreamed of crafting premium Bordeaux wines along the Central Coast of California. "When I started, I had no intention



of violating my number-one rule of winemaking, 'Don't quit your day job'; I was just trying to make wine and have fun," he recalls. In 1981, he planted 160 acres in the Adelaida District off Chimney Rock Road. "I had read and studied about [Paso's] soils, rainfall accumulation, and the history of the area. But I didn't know how that would translate into wine," Baldwin says, admitting that the first planting was "a bit of the roll of the dice." The gamble paid off, producing as it did JUSTIN's flagship wine, *Isosceles*, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot that is featured in some of the world's top restaurants.

Today, in addition to its 1,000 acres of vineyards, the JUSTIN estate is home to a luxury hotel, the JUST Inn, and a Michelin-starred restaurant; although Baldwin sold it to The Wonderful Company in 2010, he remains involved in blending trials and marketing initiatives and is committed to advancing the interests of the Paso community. "Paso has unique growing conditions, and coupled with the fact that [it] really is Southern California's wine region, I see continued measured growth," says Baldwin.

## GARY EBERLE

### Eberle Winery

When Gary Eberle came to the region in 1973, he "fell in love with Paso Robles," he says, adding, "Here [you find] some of the nicest people you'll ever meet. We also have some of the most spectacular restaurants and hotels and many things for people to do besides taste wine."

A man of many talents, Eberle played football for Penn State and received a master's degree in invertebrate zoology before changing his career path from geneticist to winemaker. While a doctoral student of enology at the University of California, Davis, he accompanied two professors on a quest to find



*Eberle Winery's barrel cellar.*

the next great red wine-producing region along the coast. "I was the sherpa. . . I carried all the soil samples, and we marched all over, primarily Paso Robles," he recalls.

Discovering that Paso Robles possesses the ideal terroir for producing red wines, Eberle co-founded Estrella River Winery & Vineyards there in 1973 before opening Eberle Winery in 1979. In 1980, he became the first producer to use the Paso Robles designation on a Cabernet label—even before he co-submitted the petition to create the appellation with Herman Schwartz, Victor Hugo Roberts, and Tom Martin in 1983.

Eberle has since stepped away from winemaking, hiring Chris Eberle (no relation) as principal winemaker in 2015. With a smile, he says, "I knew I became more valuable selling wine than making wine, and we are very fortunate that Chris is a better winemaker than I ever was—although I was close."





Michael Mooney established Chateau Margene with his wife, Margene.

## MICHAEL MOONEY

### Chateau Margene

"I am passionate about Paso and believe we produce phenomenal, distinct wines," says Michael Mooney, who operates Chateau Margene on 9 acres in the Creston District with his wife of 46 years, Margene, and son Jon, who serves as assistant winemaker.

Mooney, who is from Los Angeles, was looking for a change after a successful career as a stockbroker. While tasting at Eberle and JUSTIN on a weekend trip to Paso, he realized there was big talent in the small town. It became his aspiration not just to produce wine but to create world-class Bordeaux blends—one he's been living up to since 1998.

Reflecting on Paso's growth and developing reputation, Mooney recalls the year Daniel Daou approached him with the idea of starting the PRCC. "The mission of the PRCC is not to compare [the region] to Napa. The mission is to bring people to Paso Robles . . . to stay in our hotels, eat in our restaurants, tour our vineyards, talk to the winemakers, and see what we do. It's not about saying we are better or worse; it's just to show who we are," says Mooney.

Whether big or small, he adds, every member of the PRCC has a common goal: to promote Paso. "It is about, 'Let's get the word out.' The Creston District is distinct from Adelaida, from Willow Creek, from Estrella. . . . Everybody's got their own style."



Daniel and Georges Daou of DAOU Family Estates.

## DANIEL AND GEORGES DAOU

### DAOU Family Estates

"When we came here," Daniel Daou says, "we had a slogan: 'Live the dream—come to Paso.'" He and his brother Georges have been doing that ever since the late 1990s. Born in Lebanon and raised in France, they left the tech industry to turn the Central Coast on its head.

Like many of their aforementioned peers, they found the climate and the soils they believed would produce superior wine in Paso. Pointing out that he "grew up in Europe," Daniel asserts, "the European palate doesn't like jamminess; they like acidity and minerality. They like elegant, earthy wines. We happen to have European soils in Paso—soils you don't find in the rest of California," namely clay topsoil with a limestone shelf that affects color, aroma, texture, minerality, and acidity. "When I first made the first wine out here, it shocked me; we can achieve phenolics that no other place on earth can," he says. "And the best part is we can overdeliver to the consumer [on quality for price]."

Drawing on their knowledge of the California market, the Daous reasoned that their focus needed to be on Los Angeles first. "The mindset was if [the PRCC] can convince the Southern California consumer that within three to four hours they can be in a world-class place with world-class wine, hospitality, and food, then we all win." And while Paso stands on its own merits in that regard, the brothers dream big. "I think we can compete with Napa, and Bordeaux for that matter. The sky is the limit," says Daniel.



Harvest is a family affair for the Glunzes.

## STEVE AND MATT GLUNZ

### Glunz Family Wines

"Paso Robles is [a place that's] hard not to fall in love with. It's through [media] exposure and groups like the CAB Collective that we can truly see how far Paso has come in the ten years we've been here," says Steve Glunz of Glunz Family Wines, a 40-acre property in the Geneseo District where he and his brother Matt grow 10 acres of Cabernet (in addition to sourcing other varieties from wine regions along the Central Coast). Located on the east side of Highway 101 amid picturesque rolling hills, Geneseo is known for its warm days and cool nights, which are thanks in part to the breezes from the Templeton Gap. "Where we are positioned is ideal for Cab," Steve notes.

He and Matt are two of ten children who left a multigenerational wine- and beer-distributing business in Chicago to raise families and pursue winemaking in Paso, whose style of "wine is very easy to fall in love with," says Matt. "We both love acid and these cool nights that give us this bright, refreshing character. These wines truly make themselves; all we do is try to grow the best grapes we can."

The brothers have now been joined by their parents and a few siblings; in terms of sheer numbers, in fact, the Glunz family could well shape the future of Paso. Harvest is a family affair; during which children and adults start picking together at 2:30 a.m. in order to finish by 9 a.m.—just in time for the kids to attend school. "Our mom and dad come over and help us process the fruit. So, the last couple of years, we have had three generations of family on the crush pad," says Steve.



*Copia Vineyards owners Anita and Varinder Sahi.*

## ANITA AND VARINDER SAHI

### Copia Vineyards

“Storytelling is a passion of mine, and [we are] able to tell our story through our wines every year—not only the journey of two people meeting but our passion for making wine together,” says Anita Sahi of her and her husband Varinder’s 50-acre Willow Creek District estate, Copia Vineyards.

Varinder is an engineer from Punjab, India, who holds both a master’s degree in business and a degree in enology from UC Davis. In 2015, he met Anita, a former restaurant professional and broadcast journalist, and within a year they had moved to Paso as harvest interns; in 2017, they produced their first vintage. “It was a match made in heaven,” recalls Varinder.

While their vineyards (including an additional 26 acres in the Adelaida District) are planted to both Bordeaux and Rhône varieties, Varinder says that Cabernet holds a special place in his heart: “To me, it is the most complete grape. It has color, it has phenolics, and it really grows well in Willow Creek and Adelaida, [where] we get [a] long hang time.”

Adds Anita, “We are new to the CAB Collective, but the Cabernet program [at Copia] is a very special focus of ours. We went from 100 cases in 2017 to 350 with the next release, the 2021, which is still aging. It is nice to see it is resonating with people.”

She hopes that it will continue to do so in the long term. “I enjoy the fact that every year provides the opportunity for a unique experience and story inside the bottle, let alone what others are experiencing around that bottle,” says Anita.



*Copia Vineyards’ Kiler Canyon Estate in the Willow Creek District AVA.*



*Benom Wines’ Arnaud and Guillaume Fabre.*

## ARNAUD AND GUILLAUME FABRE

### Benom Wines

“The goal is to form a bridge between France, where we grew up, and where we are now [in order] to create drinkable wines [that] still have quite a bit of power,” says Arnaud Fabre, who runs Benom Wines with his brother, Guillaume. Located in Tin City, a Paso hub of wineries, shops, and breweries, Benom gets its name from a French word meaning “a project together,” which alludes to the brothers’ shared heritage and passion for winemaking.

Arnaud and Guillaume were born into a multigenerational winemaking family with roots in Languedoc-Roussillon and Bordeaux. Looking to create a style of wine that wasn’t bound by France’s AOC restrictions, Guillaume moved to Paso Robles in 2005, interning at L’Aventure Winery before becoming assistant winemaker there. In 2007, he launched his own company, Clos Solène, which is named for his wife.

At Guillaume and Solène’s wedding, Arnaud met and fell in love with Chloé Asseo, the daughter of L’Aventure owners Stephan and Beatrice Asseo, whereby he joined his brother in Paso. In 2015 the brothers created Benom, with Guillaume serving as farmer and winemaker and Arnaud—who calls the brand “the backbone of our history”—as head of marketing and sales.

Drawing on their family history in Bordeaux, the brothers focus on Cabernet-based wines. But they also take advantage of the diversity of grapes that can be grown in Paso to experiment with various blends such as Les Deux Frères (French for “The Two Brothers”), which combines Grenache, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Tempranillo. “In Paso, we can do blends we cannot do in France [because of regulations], so we play on the uniqueness [of the region] to find the best balance,” says Arnaud.

For its inaugural release, Benom produced 200 cases of two wines; today, production is up to 3,000 cases, all sold DTC through Benom’s wine club. The Fabres are excited to announce they have recently purchased 60 acres in the York Mountain District, 22 of which they plan to plant. “Destiny brought us here, and our goal is to stay; Paso is so special,” says Arnaud. “We want to continue the history, to plant vineyards for our kids and have them develop [the land] if they want.”