

TALENT SHOW

PASO ROBLES' NEW WAVE OF WINES COMES FROM A NETWORK OF CALIFORNIA RHÔNE GO-GETTERS ► **BY MARYANN WOROBIEC**

To map out the burgeoning yet tightly knit west Paso winegrowing community, the following pages contain profiles of seven notable names, an eclectic mix of neighbors making an equally eclectic mix of wines. There are fledgling farmers like Eric Jensen of Booker, seasoned winemakers such as Scott Hawley, and wine lovers like the Hoages and Bowkers who previously knew wine simply as their favorite beverage. But their common bond is a passion for Rhône grapes, and the result of their efforts has been soaring quality for an emerging category of California wine.



Brian Benson

BRIAN BENSON {THE MECHANIC}

"I'm very conscious that [winemaking] is something I want to do forever," says Brian Benson, and at 28, he's already been at it for more than half his life. He started when he was 13, making small batches alongside his father, Norm Benson, who founded Dark Star Cellars in 1994. The family lived in Southern California, traveling north every weekend to work at the winery.

After graduating from high school, Benson went to work with his dad full time. "I got into wine because it was the coolest thing in the

world to my dad, and my dad was the coolest thing in the world to me," he says. Benson absorbed Norm's winemaking knowledge, but he was also interested in making his own wines. His debut bottles were released on his 21st birthday, in 2003.

Benson tried to balance working with his family and managing his own brand, but eventually ran out of time and space. In 2005, he moved his winemaking operations to Denner, where he met several other winemakers and was introduced to a new world of winemaking.



Eric Jensen of Booker

options, such as sorting tables, basket presses and whole-cluster fermentation. "You can take grapes and turn it into a bottle of wine, but there are 9 million ways to get there," he explains.

Benson's surfer lingo is evident when he describes "bitchin'" grapes or how he's "stoked" about some "trippy" winemaking tricks. But behind his cool demeanor and casual vocabulary is a very sharp observer who is passionate about making terrific wines that express the best Paso has to offer.

Benson also has a second passion—hot rods—and a full fabrication shop just behind his father's winery (Dark Star's and Brian Benson's tasting rooms are side by side). With the first bit of money he made, Benson bought a 1968 Lincoln Continental he plans to refurbish. And he's found a way to combine the two interests—with his Kustom Series of wines featuring limited edition, pinstriped bottles.

92	Syrah Paso Robles Glenrose Vineyard 2007	\$35	165 cases
91	S & M Paso Robles 2007	\$35	142 cases
91	Syrah Paso Robles Denner Vineyard 2007	\$35	237 cases

BOOKER {THE FARMER}

Eric Jensen needed a change. He had done well as a broker and concert promoter and owned a big house in a gated community in Newport Beach, Calif. But one day, at the park with his son, surrounded by other people's nannies, he realized, "I hate this life." So he sold the house and moved to Paso Robles to become a farmer.

Jensen, 43, is a former broker in real estate trust sales—essentially cold-calling for investment dollars. He was good at it, but disliked controlling other people's money. When he got into concert and festival promotions, the bright spot of his job was seeing which wines were in the VIP areas.

In 2000, when Jensen moved his family to Paso Robles, it was the

biggest running joke with his friends in Southern California. "I had a gardener and a pool guy" recalls Jensen. But soon he was immersed in viticulture and winemaking, taking classes, reading books and hanging out with Saxum's Justin Smith.

Jensen impulsively purchased 85 acres that would never produce quality grapes. But he hit pay dirt the day he and Smith drove into the rocky, well-drained soils of a 102-acre property in Paso's west side. "We saw the big, steep hillsides, so we knew we could control yields. We liked that it was all different exposures, so we could plant anything," recalls Jensen.

Jensen sold off a 30-acre block (now owned by Torrin). Of the remaining 72 acres, 45 are planted, mostly to Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Jensen uses 40 of those acres for his own label and also sells grapes to Saxum, Linne Calodo and Clos Solène.

In 2005, Jensen launched the Booker label, featuring bold and ripe wines from his vineyard. Both the vineyard and wines are named after the site's original owners, Claude and Dick Booker, who once owned more 1,000 acres in the area and were known as being great neighbors and sponsors of the land.

The energetic Jensen is quick to brag these days about the time he spends on a tractor (every day), his opinions on shortcuts (there aren't any) and the two most important things about vineyard manage-

ment (canopy management and crop load). "I'm a farmer," he says with a grin. "I bang my chest when I say it."

97	Syrah Paso Robles Fracture 2008	\$50	200 cases
95	The Alchemist 28 Paso Robles 2007	\$55	250 cases
95	Vertigo Paso Robles 2008	\$50	225 cases

CALIZA {NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK}

In 2001, Pam and Carl Bowker found an ad for a wine tour of Tuscany and signed up. While traveling, they tasted terrific wines and visited musty caves filled with old bottles, but the trip took place shortly after the tragedies of Sept. 11, which made them look at things differently. Taking a photograph in one cellar, Pam saw a light go on in Carl's eyes. "There's Carl off in a corner, just looking at the whole scene. I saw that and thought 'oh boy.' I wasn't sure where he was going with all this."

But Carl knew where he was headed, and almost immediately started taking winemaking and viticulture classes. Both Carl and Pam were used to working on long-term projects, as national convention and trade show managers. "I loved what I was doing in my life, but coupled with the tragedy, I thought to myself that I should be doing something I was really passionate about," says Carl, 53.

Two months later while on a road trip, heavy fog forced them to pull off the highway. They ended up in Paso Robles, which was terra incognita to them. But they fell in love with the small town atmosphere and the quaint community.

Within a year, the Bowkers had purchased a 50-acre lot in Paso Robles, with a Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard that became their weekend project. In 2003, they purchased a 60-acre parcel next to Torrin, with 30 acres of vines that needed to be replanted.

"Talk about a learning experience," says Pam, 60. "We were the new kids on the block." Relying on a mixture of hard work and enthusiasm, the couple replanted the majority of the vineyard to Rhône varieties.

with the 2006 vintage.

Tomlin's Scott Hawley helped with the winemaking early on, but now the Bowlers do everything on their own. They sell grapes to some of the vintners in the area, including Villa Creek and Linne Calodo. Walking up the steep hillsides of their vineyard property, it's clear that Carl has found his passion. "This is where the wine is made, right here," he says.

92	Syrah Paso Robles 2007	\$45	200 cases
91	Azimuth Paso Robles 2007	\$45	275 cases

DENNER {THE HUB}

If you were to pinpoint the epicenter of west Paso's wine scene, it would be Denner. Each year, 400,000 tons of grapes are processed here, with seven winemakers working on 10 different labels (including Epoch, Tomlin and Denner's own label). It's a collaborative environment where winemakers share space, equipment and ideas with each other.

At the center of all this is 25-year-old Anthony Yount, a St. Louis native who graduated from Cal Poly in 2007 and who is now Denner's winemaker and facility manager. Yount was studying agribusiness when he took a class in viticulture, and says it was the first class where he never had to take notes. "I just absorbed it," says Yount. He visited Denner on his 21st birthday for a wine tasting and learned about an internship there. Within a couple of years, he went from intern to full-time cellar help, and worked at nearby Villa Creek. He became Denner's winemaker in 2009. "I don't even know how it happened. I just put my head down and did what I wanted to do," says Yount. If he's overwhelmed by his new responsibilities, he doesn't show it.

Ron and Marilyn Denner are among the largest landowners on the west side of Paso, with about 126 acres, most of it within view of the famed James Berry Vineyard. Some of the hills are subdivided, so if you were to view the site from above, it would look like a wagon wheel with five different sections, each having a different exposure. One hill, for example, is planted to two different clones of Grenache, plus Roussanne, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. The Denners sell grapes to Justin, Villa Creek, Linne Calodo, Brian Benson and others.

Yount is still defining his own winemaking style, but he is avoiding what he calls "absolutisms"—claims of 100 percent new oak, or 100 percent whole-cluster fermentation—which he doesn't believe lead to balanced wines. He prefers small lots to blend together. He also has a streak of experimentation, showing off a whole cluster-fermented Cunoise he made in a Beaujolais style. "We don't have 30 generations that have made wine from this estate," he explains. "We don't have to do what our parents did."

97	The Dirt Worshipper Paso Robles 2008	\$45	810 cases
93	Syrah Paso Robles 2007	\$40	807 cases
93	The Dirt Worshipper Paso Robles 2006	\$40	668 cases

EPOCH {THE REVIVALISTS}

To understand the significance of what Denver geologists Bill and Liz Armstrong are doing with Epoch Estate Wines in Paso Robles, it helps to be aware of an unusual aspect of the area's history.

The Polish concert pianist, composer and statesman Ignacy Jan



Winemaker Jordan Fiorentini of Epoch

Paderewski was the most famous resident of Paso Robles when he lived there in the early 1900s. He owned several thousand acres in the area, and planted prunes, almonds and grapes—Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. After the repeal of Prohibition, he would take his grapes to the York Mountain winery to be made into wine. His Zinfandel was awarded a gold medal at the state fair in 1933, one of the first indications of the region's winegrowing potential.

The Armstrongs purchased 350 acres, including Paderewski's historic 65-acre Rancho San Ignacio, in 2004, and also recently purchased York Mountain Winery—where Paderewski used to take his grapes to be vinified. "It's like we're putting Paso's history back together," says Epoch winemaker Jordan Fiorentini, 34.

Paderewski originally came to the area because of his arthritis, seeking a cure in the mineral baths of the area. You can still smell the sulfur in the air from the hot springs on the property. Fist-sized rocks, bleached white from the high content of lime, stick out from the ground, reminiscent of the Rhône.

"It feels like I'm in Châteauneuf, but with California weather," says Fiorentini, pointing out the steep hillsides and the permeable calcareous and limestone soils. As warm as it gets in the summer, it cools

down more at night, so the grapes attain ripeness with plenty of acidity. The vineyard is planted primarily to red Rhône varieties plus Zinfandel and Tempranillo. The Armstrongs own a third site, called Catapult, a 30-acre vineyard next to Booker in the heart of the Templeton Gap.

Since the debut 2007 vintage, the estate wines have been wonderfully ripe and concentrated (Saxum's Justin Smith was the original consultant). Paso Robles still celebrates Paderewski's musical legacy with an annual festival, and the Armstrongs are celebrating the region's winemaking history by making some of the most exciting wines of the present.

95	Ingenuity Paderewski Vineyard Paso Robles 2008	\$55	415 cases
95	Syrah Paso Robles Authenticity Paderewski Vineyard 2008	\$55	242 cases
95	Syrah Paso Robles Block B Paderewski Vineyard 2008	\$55	181 cases

TERRY HOAGE

{A NEW PLAYBOOK}

In 2000, former NFL defensive back Terry Hoage and his wife, Jennifer, moved to Paso Robles—a region they hadn't heard of before a friend pointed them to the area—to raise their two children in a rural setting. They bought a 10-acre property with plans to build a house, and intended to plant grapes out front as landscaping.

Then one night, Hoage was at Villa Creek restaurant and began talking with restaurant owner (and vintner) Chris Cherry. Cherry introduced him to another patron, Eric Jensen of Booker. The vineyard plans started to grow.

Hoage planted 6 acres, working the land himself, and loved it. He befriended Justin Smith, who gave him valuable advice. Two years later, Smith showed the Hoages another property that he said was capable of making world-class wines. They seized the opportunity, sold the original site, and focused on the new land and its 17 acres of grapes.

Smith helped with the vineyard planting and winemaking, but by 2004, the Hoages were on their own. "A lot of people think we just put a lot of football money into [this project], but that's not true," says Hoage. With a degree in genetics, Hoage didn't find the science of grapegrowing or winemaking intimidating. The couple started looking at wines differently, deconstructing them and defining what they wanted. "Balance, texture and structure are most important," explains Jennifer.

Their dream for a grounded life for their family meshed well with owning a vineyard and making their own wine. They live among the vines and built a winery in 2005. The focus is entirely on Rhône varieties, detailed wines with names that play on terms from wine and football.

"I didn't know this word existed before I was in it, but we consider ourselves vigneronns," says Terry. "We live here, this is what we do."

91	Grenache Paso Robles Skins 2007	\$38	315 cases
90	Syrah Paso Robles The Hedge 2007	\$48	405 cases
90	The Pick Cuvee Paso Robles 2007	\$40	310 cases

TORRIN {THE EXPRESSIONIST}

"We're 10 minutes from downtown [Paso Robles], but it feels like the middle of nowhere," says Scott Hawley, standing at one of the high points of Torrin, his 30-acre vineyard sandwiched between Booker and L'Aventure in the Templeton Gap. Torrin ("of the hills" in Gaelic) is full of rugged slopes, and while Hawley talks about the exposure and soil variations, his wiry black dog runs up and down the hills in an endless game of vineyard rock fetch.



Torrin's Scott Hawley

Hawley, 39, grew up in Porterville, Calif., in the Sierra Foothills. He knew of Paso Robles only as a pit stop on Highway 101. While attending Fresno State to study urban land economics and play water polo, he took his first winemaking class. "On the first day of school, they didn't give out textbooks, they gave out rubber boots. I thought, 'All right!'" recalls Hawley.

Hawley finds winemaking a creative process with no two years alike. He says that the biggest decisions he makes are when to pick ("since of course you can't put the grapes back on") and finalizing the wine before bottling. "These are the two decisions where a winemaker earns his money, and when he can put his signature on [a wine]," he explains.

His first wine job was at Fetzer, in Mendocino County, where he was soon responsible for 1.5 million cases of white wine. When Fetzer was expanding in Paso Robles, Hawley met "Pebble" Smith, who poured him a glass of his own wine. Before then, Hawley had already had two epiphanies with Syrah, one in Australia's McLaren Vale, the other at E. Guigal in the Northern Rhône. So when Smith gave Hawley a glass of "home brew" from vineyards on Smith's property, Hawley was blown away. "It was world-class, as good as anything," he recalls.

Hawley moved to Paso in 2000 to start Fetzer's Five Rivers red wine program, leaving shortly afterward to work for Summerwood, and then his own label in 2006. He went from managing 5,000 tons of grapes to 50, but says he always knew that was the direction he was going.

Hawley's wines are expressions of his vineyard and the grapes he buys from James Berry Vineyard. "From a winemaking standpoint, I don't think you could be any less invasive; the less I do the better," he says modestly. Torrin's stunningly rich, smooth and polished reds reflect their maker's preference for whole-cluster fermentation and his knack for blending (including the judicious use of Alicante Bouschet as in traditional Rhône wines).

"Some of the most memorable wines I've tried have been about not just the wine, but the place and the circumstance," explains Hawley. "A lot of them say, here you go, this is my take on this place."

96	Akasha Paso Robles 2008	\$60	96 cases
96	The Maven Paso Robles 2008	\$60	98 cases
95	The Banshee Paso Robles 2008	\$60	94 cases