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# RIDING

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by Kim F. Miller

# Pretty in Paso Robles

*New venue brings spotlight to flourishing equestrian activity in Central California.*

A hotbed of western and cutting horse activity for many years, Paso Robles, or "Pass of the Oaks," has been more of a pass-through town for hunter/jumper competitors in the past. The Baxter family amped up the region's rich eventing legacy with the construction of Twin Rivers Ranch in 2001, and it's been a busy venue ever since. Dressage enthusiasts have an active San Luis Obispo CDS chapter and some rated shows, but hunter/jumpers often headed south to Los Angeles or north to the Bay Area for A rated competition.

Linda Starkman's much-anticipated Paso Robles Horse Park changes all that with its first two-week show, the Central California Classic, which doubles as the venue's debut. The Park's director Amanda Diefenderfer grew up in the area as a hunter/jumper rider and recalls Pebble Beach Equestrian Center in Monterey being the best option for shows at the time. No longer a competition facility, Pebble Beach was lovely, but a long haul at about four hours. "As a competitor, I'm thrilled about the Horse Park and I think my fellow hunter/jumper riders are really going to enjoy the quality of life associated with this area."

Dressage trainer and amateur eventer Cindy Ramirez-Smith has a similar view. The region has always been strong with recreational riders, and in recent years there's been an influx of competition oriented english equestrians. Twin Rivers and the completion of the Templeton Farms Equestrian training center in 2011 have served these trends for local riders and those travelling from both ends of the state.

"It's all a positive for us," says Cindy of the new Paso Robles Horse Park's impact. "I think local people are planning to go and that it will also draw in a lot of people from outside the area. When I compare our area with others, like the Bay Area, my trainer friends talk about having 20 places within an hour's drive to show in a single month. Whereas, when we've wanted to show, it's mostly been a three hour drive."

Ariane Rezvani has been a dressage trainer in the Paso Robles area for 28 years and reports that english riding activity is definitely on the rise. In February of this year, she purchased the website [www.HorseConnectionCenter.com](http://www.HorseConnectionCenter.com) partly in response to that reality.

Started in 2009 and established as more of a western oriented, online community newspaper, the website is on its way to becoming a broader platform, she says. "I'd like to provide an outlet for people of all disciplines and all kinds of breeds, and focusing on education." Toward that end, Ariane has nearly sealed a deal to have Paso Robles become the first U.S. site for a Horses Inside Out course, likely in October. "Equine locomotion, training and management from an anatomical perspective" is the focus of this program from the United Kingdom, which Ariane describes as a "college level pre-veterinary class" for enthusiasts and pros alike.

She hopes the Horse Connection Center website will promote such educational events, support the region's professionals and build up the area's profile among equestrians everywhere. That would be a boon for breeders and other equine endeavors and help the region continue growth in all disciplines and breeds.

## Stuff To Do

Rolling hills covered with vineyards or dotted with oak trees, including the black oaks for which the Black Oak Pony Club was named, make for an inviting landscape. Wineries and art abound and gourmet dining is plentiful, both in quaint downtown Paso Robles and in surrounding towns of San Luis Obispo County. The Central California Classic coincides with the big annual Paso Arts Fest, "an incredible experience that takes over downtown," Amanda explains. The Fest's mission is to make art accessible to all, so it's free and full of demonstrations, chances to meet the artists and dabble in the process. Festival or no, downtown is a neat slice of



Linda Starkman & Buddy

*The handsome Pecheron Sam greets visitors to Epoch Estates, one of a few local wineries with fun horsey connections.  
Photo: Elisabeth Millay Photography*



Background photo: Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance

Americana, built around the 4.6 acre Centennial Park. It features a Carnegie library that's also home to the city's historical society.

Wineries and wine tours are a big attraction. The Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance's Chris Taranto speaks highly of spots with strong horse ties. At AronHill Vineyards, the horse tie-in goes beyond the abstract horse drawing on its labels. Owner Judy Aron is a longtime sporthorse breeder who is known for putting as much passion into wine making as she does into her horses. AronHill's many varieties are not widely available, so they make good momentos to take home.

Visitors to Epoch Estates winery are invited to swing by the rustic barn and visit "the big boys," the Epoch Percherons. Jake, Zeke, Willis and Sam are handsome and friendly examples of this beautiful draft breed. In addition to delicious wines to taste and Percherons to meet, Epoch Estate offers a restored farmhouse from the late 1800s and other structures and activities that honor the land and those who worked on it first. Chris also recommends two wineries, Cass and Calcareous, that partner with Outback Trail Rides to host rides through their vineyards.

Of the area's many wine tour companies, Amanda says Grapeline Tours and Breakaway Tours are especially good picks for "giving you a feel for the region's wines and giving you the confidence to find something you'll like."

Central California's beaches are another good option, approximately 20-30 miles to the west of Paso Robles. Avila Beach is a great little town and beach and Amanda recommends the Avila Grill there, or the more casual and dog-friendly Dockside in Morro Bay. Speaking of dogs, Cayucos Beach has a portion for off-leash enjoyment for the canines that typically travel with the horsey set and could use a good romp.

Chris recommends the hearty meals at Villa Creek Restaurant or the lighter fare at Thomas Hill Organics. And a few people mentioned the Pony Club at Cheval, a 16-room boutique hotel in downtown. The Pony Club features a zinc-topped horseshoe-shaped wine bar and the hotel is both elegant and dog friendly.

Feeling brave? Haul your horse down to Morro Strand State Beach and go for a gallop on the sand. Dogs welcome there, too, but watch for the spot at which they're required to be on a leash, on the north end and roughly where the stretch of houses appear.

Here's a toast to all who get to enjoy this lovely area thanks to the Horse Park's debut and to continued growth of equestrian activity in the area.

