

MOUNT EDEN CHARDONNAY 1976–2003 by Claude Kolm

In the 1970s, the vanguard of the wine world turned to California wines, especially after the famous Paris tasting staged by Steven Spurrier in 1976, in which several California Chardonnays and Cabernets bested esteemed French peers in a blind tasting judged by a distinguished panel of French wine professionals—because they were so French. (The most sought-after labels at the time included Mount Eden Vineyards, which was not entered in the Spurrier tasting.) Most, but not all, Chardonnay coming out of California these days would no longer be taken for French. But some institutions endure, and Mount Eden Vineyards is one.

The property is in the Santa Cruz Mountains above Silicon Valley, at the same height as the Monte Bello vineyard of its near neighbor, Ridge Vineyards. The origin of the vineyards dates to the early 1940s. That is when an irascible and eccentric wine genius named Martin Ray—who had learned winemaking from Paul Masson, a Burgundian who had come to California—planted 6 acres (2.43ha) of Chardonnay in the mountains, as well as Pinot Noir and, later, Cabernet Sauvignon, selling the wines under his own name. Ray took on investors in the 1960s to provide capital for expansion but then fell out with them, and the 1970 vintage was the last he made from the vineyards he had planted. (Subsequent wines bottled under the Martin Ray label have nothing to do with the original vineyards.) The new investors began bottling the wine under the current name with the 1972 vintage. Starting with a great vineyard, they produced a series of outstanding, often stunning, wines.

Several winemakers were associated with the early Mount Eden Vineyards wines. But in 1981, Mount Eden hired Jeffrey Patterson as assistant winemaker. Patterson had graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, as a biology major and then decided to pursue his interest in wine, including a stint studying at UC Davis. Patterson worked with Richard Graff (of Chalone Vineyards fame) that year and then, a little more than a year after joining the operation, he

became head winemaker, the position he has held ever since.

There are now 20 acres (8ha) planted to Chardonnay. The vineyard is 15 miles (24km) inland from the Pacific Ocean, which provides for relatively cool weather during the growing season. At an altitude of 2,000ft (610m), the vineyard gets more sun, and less fog and rain, than vineyards lower in the mountains, and the slopes face east, which promotes slower ripening. (Harvests are usually in late September and October, sometimes extending to November; so, later than those of many other Chardonnay vineyards in California.) The soils are of Franciscan shale, which Patterson describes as well draining and having the texture of aged Parmesan cheese.

Patterson takes a minimalist approach to winemaking, in contrast to most California winemakers. Yields are small not only by the standards of California, but even when measured against Burgundy's most prestigious domaines: 15–25hl/ha. (Patterson confesses to having had as high as 40hl/ha—horror of horrors!) Factors that influence these low yields include the infertile Franciscan shale soils, clones that are low-yielding, and the overall policy of the winery not to encourage high yields through pruning practices, etc. The wines spend eight or nine months in barrel (François Frères). Malolactic fermentation is not induced, in contrast to much of California and the rest of the New World. Typical production is about 2,000 cases, and the wines range from 13.5 to 13.9 degrees in alcohol. The wines are released late, but typically at that point they still need several years before they begin to approach maturity. The can seem oaky when very young, but the oak integrates very well with time. They possess none of the residual sugar that marks many New World Chardonnays.

Bipin Desai, profiled in *WFW* 8, organized a tasting of Mount Eden Vineyard Estate Chardonnays, thereby permitting an overall assessment of the potential of the vineyard. The results reported below show wines capable of aging 20+ years, and with a definite sense of terroir, resembling top Puligny-

Montrachet premiers crus for their minerality and silky texture. With extended aging, the wines often turn more austere and toward Chablis, which seems to be the case with virtually all California Chardonnays that are able to age gracefully for a substantial time. In every way, these wines are closer to top Burgundy counterparts than to most other California Chardonnays. Lovers of fine wines are lucky to have this outstanding site run by talented and dedicated people who are more interested in quality than profit margin.

THE TASTING

All wines were from magnum, except 1977 and 1984, which came from fifths. Many of the bottles had been stored for a substantial time in unrefrigerated conditions, and thus this tasting may underestimate the aging potential of the wines.

2003 Toasty oak on nose, turning to sautéed golden apples. Round and unctuous on the palate, seemingly rather high in alcohol, chewy texture, tangerine fruit, fine length. Will not be released for two years. **17.5**

2002 Corked. **NS**

2001 An early vintage. Initially, grassy, light, and indistinct on the nose, then turning to light apple fruit. Young and silky on the palate, but still a little tough, with apple fruit and firmness, French restraint, excellent balance. **17 (18)**

2000 Closed on the nose, with slight toast and some apple. Lovely finesse on the palate, with purity to the apple and slightly mineral fruit, with just a touch of coarseness in the texture. Should age and improve for many years. **18**

1999 Harvested in September. Closed, with some oak, but less high-toned than the 2000. Finesse and silkiness on

the palate; needs more time but is suggestive of a Puligny fairly high on the hill. Great balance. **18 (18.5)**

1998 Another September harvest. Restrained apple nose with a touch of tropical fruit. Less finesse and depth, and more coarse than the 1997, lacking precision. **15.5**

1997 Another early vintage. Lightly floral, even a bit grassy in the nose. Rich but balanced, and elegant in the mouth, with a silky texture—again, suggesting Puligny high on the hill, but still very young. **17 (17.5)**

1996 The hot summer was not beneficial. Incipient peach fruit on the nose, firm and deep with peach flavors in the mouth, more structured and less silky than the foregoing, almost as though shifting from Puligny to Chassagne. **17.5**

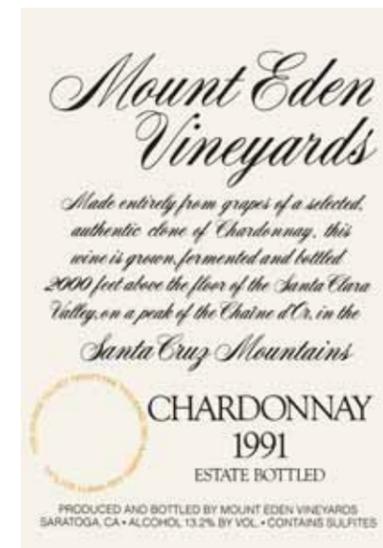
1995 Small crop, harvest in October. Tea and dried-flowers nose. Powerful and rich in the mouth, but not deep or generous. A lot of personality, but not well balanced. **15.5**

1994 A classic year. Still a little oak on the nose. Firm in the mouth, but with elegance, length, minerality, succulence. Complete—almost like a Bâtard-Montrachet. Just about at its peak, but should hold for a number of years. **18**

1993 El Niño year, meaning lots of rain over the winter. Restrained and mineral on the nose, finesse and richness on the palate, with apple fruit and a touch of apple cider. There are some flaws here, but this is still very good. **16.5**

1992 Peach nose and flavor. Elegant, firm, linear, and long on the palate. At its peak over the next 10 years. **17.5**

1991 Large crop. Firm on the palate, may still improve with more bottle-



age. Elegant, but not silky, mineral with a hint of butter, lacks complexity. **17** but may improve.

1990 A year in which all went well. Lacking some structure, but seductive, nevertheless, with a hint of caramel to the apple flavors. Powerful, but a touch coarse. **16.5**

1989 Nobly austere on the nose; intense, nervy, and incisive on the palate, with restraint and purity, some minerality, great acidity, and firmness. Long life ahead. **18**

1988 From more consistent storage. Drought year. Austere apple aromas on the nose. Great acidity in the mouth, incisive with minerality, stoniness, and some apple flavors, and overall electricity, almost like a great Riesling. **18.5**

1987 Touch of orange peel on the nose, more richness on the palate than the preceding two wines—a return to Puligny form. Firm and still on the upside. **18**

1986 Broad, rich, and intense, but not incisive the way the 1987, '88, and '89

are. Would not be surprised to see it alive, maybe even better, in 10 years' time. **16.5**

1985 A little mealy, lacking purity, still hard, and not very generous. **14.5**

1984 Like 1988, from better storage. Dense, succulent, still needs time; incipient peach flavors, very Chablis-like. **17.5+**

1983 El Niño year. Some toast on the nose, firm and solid on the palate, with elegance and nervosity, even electricity; Chablis-like. Should hold, even improve, for 10+ years. **17.5**

1982 El Niño year. The wine did not ferment dry. Smokiness on the nose, lemony on the palate; intense, long, unique. **18**

1981 Purity and clarity, again Chablis-like in its austerity, but not quite the complexity of some of the others. **17**

1980 Touch of oxidation. Rich and powerful in its youth; has declined substantially but is still drinkable. Very rich. **13.5**

1979 Very austere on the nose, just a touch of oxidation on the palate, but also firmness and depth. **17**

1978 Cited consistently by those who tasted it young as one of the greatest Chardonnay-based wines they have ever tasted. No longer what it once was, but still a very fine wine with great richness, dimension, and complexity. **17.5**

1977 Maderized and slightly corked. **NS**

1976 Drought year. Intense, incisive, mineral, earthy; past its lofty peak, but still intriguing and giving pleasure. **17.5**

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