

# Mount Eden Vineyards

The Mount Eden vineyards were created by Martin Ray, who first planted vines on these lofty slopes in 1943. The first vintage of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir here was in 1946. After Martin Ray lost control of the vineyards in 1972, the vineyard was divided, with the upper portion becoming Mount Eden, the Ray family retaining a lower section with just 5 acres (2ha) of Chardonnay. The Mount Eden shareholders entrusted the daily management to a series of mostly youthful winemakers. Deterred by the isolated location and low wages, they tended not to last long. In the early 1980s, Jeff Patterson, a young man from Berkeley and a graduate of UC Davis, took a winemaking job here, and his wife Eleanor became Mount Eden's sales manager. In 1988, Patterson became a shareholder—and 20 years later, he and his wife became the majority shareholders.

A long private road climbs a mountainside near Saratoga and eventually reaches the property, which lies at 2,000ft (600m), well above the fog line. Martin Ray's original winery is still in use as a barrel room for the Cabernet Sauvignon, but caves have been tunneled into the hillside for storing the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, which need more precise temperature and humidity control than the original winery can provide.

Hardly any of the old vineyards survive. Only half the old Chardonnay is still in production, the other vines having been replanted. Of the 7 acres (2.8ha) of Pinot Noir, most were replanted in 1997, and the Cabernet Sauvignon dates from the early 1980s. Yields are extremely modest, because the shale soils are very low in nutrients and the older vineyards are dry-farmed. Foraging deer and erosion are the main obstacles to viticulture, but on the positive side, the soils are well drained and there is no frost and little disease. Jeff Patterson is emphatic: he is not interested in making obviously fruity wines but wants them to have power, length of flavor, *nervosité*, and longevity. Indeed, he finds

that the Chardonnays often age even better than the Pinot Noirs. Nor does he want wines high in alcohol: they usually range from 13% to 14.2%.

The Chardonnay is barrel fermented with natural yeasts and spends about ten months in 50 percent new French oak. The wine goes through full malolactic fermentation, but there is no lees stirring. Patterson is convinced that the wine's mineral flavors come from the clone rather than the soil. It is probable that Paul Masson, who came from Beaune, brought cuttings from Burgundy, and these grew into vines from which Martin Ray took cuttings when he planted here.

A second Chardonnay is made from Edna Valley fruit. It used to be known as MEV, and the fruit came from the MacGregor Vineyard, which has some of the oldest Chardonnay in Edna Valley. In 1999, Jean-Pierre Wolff bought the vineyard and renamed it, and it remains the source for the Mount Eden Edna Valley wine. It exhibits lush tropical-fruit flavors that, it could be argued, are the polar opposite of the mountain fruit from Santa Cruz.

For Pinot Noir, Patterson looks for moderate ripeness. The grapes are partially destemmed, receive a cold soak, and are fermented with natural yeasts and regular punch-downs. The wine used to be aged in all new oak, but today the proportion is 50 percent, and the aging period has been reduced from about 18 months to 11. There is little racking, and the wines are bottled without fining or filtration.

The 20 acres (8ha) of Cabernet Sauvignon are planted lower down, at around 1,400ft (425m). There are also small blocks of Merlot and Cabernet Franc, and the blend usually contains about 75 percent Cabernet. This wine spends 18 months in oak, and until 2000 an Old Vine Reserve bottling was sometimes produced from

**Right:** Jeff Patterson, who came to Mount Eden in the 1980s and is now, with his wife Eleanor, the majority shareholder.



the original vines planted in the 1950s, but they have now had to be pulled out.

Only about one-third of the Mount Eden production is of the trio of Estate wines. Another third is taken up with the Edna Valley wine, and in 2004 Patterson introduced the Saratoga Cuvées. These are blends of declassified lots of the Estate wines, with fruit purchased from neighboring vineyards. The wines have the typicity of Santa Cruz Mountain fruit but are only partially made from the estate vineyards. Considerably cheaper than the Estate wines, they offer good value.

Even though venerable vines make up only a relatively small proportion of the fruit these days, the wines remain superb. They do not always show that well when young, because they are deliberately made in a restrained style. There is nothing flashy or fruit-forward about them. Mount Eden's regular customers know that these are wines that do not show their full potential or complexity on release but repay cellaring. Moreover, since the mid-1980s, the wines have been better than ever; some older vintages were distinctly vegetal, as a consequence of the large, sprawling canopies that were standard in the preceding decades. Patterson introduced leaf-pulling and proper canopy management, and today herbaceous characters, while not entirely eliminated (nor should they be) are kept firmly in the background.

## FINEST WINES

### Chardonnay

**2006 Saratoga Cuvée** Stone-fruit nose. Plump and concentrated; less racy than the Estate wine but has good acidity and lift, especially on the finish.

**2006 Estate ★** Pure apricot nose; really elegant if not markedly mineral. Lean, tight, and citric, with high acidity—a Burgundian style with fine length.

**2005 Estate** Rich, oily, Chardonnay nose, quite oaky; plumper than 2006. Rich and weighty but has fine acidity to cut the fat; stylish and intense, with a long, citric finish.



Above: Mount Eden is still an isolated vantage point, from which Patterson can look down with great satisfaction

**1997 Estate** Rich, toasty, waxy nose; apricot fruit. Rich and full-bodied but retains good acidity; stylish and tangy, with little sign of age. Quite long on the finish.

### Pinot Noir

**2006 Saratoga Cuvée [V]** Warm, spicy cherry nose, upfront and not that complex. Medium-bodied, fresh, and lively, with fine acidity. It shows less depth and subtlety than the Estate wine but is still delicious and vibrant, with a long, earthy finish.

**2006 Estate** Slightly earthy nose, with some raspberry fruit in the background. Concentrated, yet fresh and delicate, with light tannins, pure red-fruit flavors, and a structure that's balanced and graceful.

**2005 Estate** Smoky raspberry nose. Supple but concentrated, with more flesh than the 2006, speckled with delicate red-fruit acidity. An understated style, with good length.

**2000 Estate** Undergrowth and mulch on the nose, which is distinctly Burgundian, with cherry and clove aromas. Sweet attack, with bright acidity that keeps it fresh and lively. Both precise and stylish, with intense red-fruit flavors on the long finish.

### Cabernet Sauvignon

**2006 Estate** Rich, stylish nose; quite leafy but not herbaceous, with black-cherry fruit. Medium-bodied and quite intense, yet lacks a little flesh. A lean style, pretty but a touch light, with assertive acidity that gives it freshness, vibrancy, and length.

**2005 Saratoga Cuvée** Sweet, cedary, undergrowth nose. Plump, juicy, and accessible but doesn't lack

concentration; shows black fruits and spice on the palate, if not great complexity.

**2005 Estate** Firm, oaky, leafy nose; quite dense. Medium-bodied, with firm tannins and a good deal of weight, extract, and persistence. Not overblown, but lean, balanced, and long.

**2001 Estate** Slightly sweaty nose, with rich black-currant aromas and a touch of mint. Suave in texture, delicious, and lively, with fine-grained tannins and a long, delicate, black-curranty finish.

### Mount Eden Vineyards

Area under vine: 40 acres (16ha)  
Average production: 180,000 bottles  
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