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## Dining & Wine

The Pour

### In a Mountaintop Vineyard, History and Mystique Reign

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SARATOGA, Calif.

YOU don't so much drive to Mount Eden Vineyards as hang on for dear life. The narrow dirt road twists through hair-pin turns as you ascend the Santa Cruz Mountains, a hilly coastal range that rises above this prosperous Silicon Valley community like islets over an ocean of suburbia.

When finally you arrive at this isolated vineyard and look back on the grapevines that seem to want to slide down the steep slopes, you can't help marveling at the tenacity and willpower of Martin Ray, a California visionary who decided back in the 1940's that this was the only place to plant his grapes.

"To come all the way up here, it really took some belief," said Jeffrey Patterson, who arrived at Mount Eden in 1981, became winemaker the next year and has been the proprietor, with his wife, Ellie, since 1986.

It was a matter not just of where Mr. Ray planted, but also what he planted. At a time when California produced primarily jug wines and sweet fortified wines, Mr. Ray put in cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and pinot noir. By many accounts, including his own, the wines, sold under the Martin Ray label, could reach sensational heights.

Mr. Ray was more of an idealist than a businessman, and by the time he died in 1976, he had lost his winery and most of the property, which had become Mount Eden Vineyards in 1972. But in Mount Eden's graceful but intense cabernet, its elegant pinot noir, and especially in its deep, luminous, long-lived estate chardonnay, you can still taste the magic that first brought Mr. Ray up this mountain.

He was a protégé of Paul Masson, who, like Martin Ray, hangs on painfully to this day as a brand name with no connection to the original. The real Paul Masson was a French immigrant who came to California in 1878 and pioneered the making of sparkling wine in the Santa Cruz Mountains before Prohibition. With such rich history, you would think that Mount Eden would be in the pantheon of California wineries, revered and celebrated.

Instead, Mount Eden is rarely mentioned among California's elite bottles. With the notable exception of Matt Kramer, a columnist for Wine Spectator, most critics give short shrift to Mount Eden, while many consumers confuse it with Villa Mt. Eden, a large, nondescript winery in the Napa Valley. While critically acclaimed California chardonnays like Kistler, Marcassin and Peter Michael can cost well over \$100 a bottle, Mount Eden commands maybe \$30 to \$35 these days, even less than the \$50 that Martin Ray charged for his 1970 chardonnay.

These are slights that Mr. Patterson, a low-key but intense sort, accepts but feels keenly. "

There's a cultural bias against the historical wineries," Mr. Patterson said. "It's not just true for me. It's true for a lot of established wineries. They have a hard time generating interest."

No doubt that is true. People are always fascinated with the new and fashionable. Mount Eden does not employ one of the hot, attention-getting wine consultants. It is not on the tourist trail, and Mr. Patterson does not make syrah, the current darling among California winemakers.

Just as important, though, Mount Eden refuses to conform to the stylistic demands of today's market, which emphasize power, lush fruit flavors and immediate gratification over nuance, minerality and balance.

The cabernets are more sinewy and lean than rich and concentrated. The pinot noir, which is made in very small quantities, is light-bodied and graceful rather than sweet and plush. And, rather than flavors of oak, butterscotch, tropical fruit and popcorn, the chardonnay offers captivating texture and subtle flavors wound around a core of lively acidity. It takes time to unravel, sometimes many years, which puts Mount Eden in the company of great historic California chardonnay producers like Stony Hill and Hanzell rather than among the celebrated new wave, whose aging ability is untested.

Last July, Bipin Desai, a California collector who focuses primarily on French wines, organized a tasting in Los Angeles of every vintage of Mount Eden chardonnay from 1976 to 2003. This is one of the few California wines he does collect.

"A lot of people who came to the tasting did not comprehend how great the wines would turn out," he said in a telephone interview. "It was a revelation for many people."

Mr. Desai agrees that Mount Eden wines have never really gotten their due. "That's the tragedy of the thing," he said. "The bigger, bolder-style wines impress people, and I think that's unfortunate."

What makes Mount Eden different? It's the combination of soil, climate, weather and history - all the elements of terroir. If ever there were a California place to apply that French concept, it would be Mount Eden. Mr. Patterson, who says he is not a Francophile, puts it another way.

"I'm a believer in dry farming, poor soil, high stress, and you've got to have a view," he said.

The vineyards, planted mostly on east-facing slopes - 20 acres around the top of the mountain at 2,000 feet, and 20 more below - are cooled by breezes from the Pacific Ocean and warmed by the rising sun. Still, as with many vineyards planted on mountains, the yields are naturally low. Mr. Patterson says he averages about two tons an acre if all goes well, far less than you would expect on the floor of the Napa Valley, for example.

This year, though, not everything went well. Spring rains interfered with flowering in the pinot noir and chardonnay vines, and Mr. Patterson said he got no more than a quarter of a ton per acre, which he called "off-the-charts low." Luckily, the rains did not affect the cabernet vines, which bud later than the others.

To insure against vintages like this, and to bring in a steady cash flow, for the last 20 years Mount Eden has bought chardonnay grapes from the Edna Valley in San Luis Obispo County. The grapes were used to make a wine that used to be called MacGregor Vineyard and is now called Wolff Vineyard (the vineyard changed hands). It is also a good chardonnay, but not in the same league as the estate-grown version.

When Mr. Ray planted his vineyard 60 years ago, the valley below was all farmland. Now, from the low-slung house that Mr. Ray built for himself amid his vineyards and in which Mr. Patterson and his family now live, the suburbs of Silicon Valley stretch out into the distance. Sitting on the deck on a pleasant afternoon with a glass of chardonnay, it's easy to see how Mount Eden got its name. The place and the wines have a mystique and an identity that seem beyond human control.

"They're classic, they age, they're different," Mr. Patterson says of his wines, although he acknowledges that he has little choice in the matter. "We're a viticultural island here."