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Like the winery itself, Mount Eden chardonnays are aging well

By Laurie Daniel

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I take a lot of shots at California chardonnay, but you can find well-balanced, flavorful examples of the varietal if you're willing to hunt for them. A cool climate, good farming and deft winemaking will most often produce good results.

But what sets apart a truly distinctive chardonnay is just the right vineyard site, a site that's expressed in every bottle of wine produced from it. There aren't many of these special places in California, but one shining example is Mount Eden Vineyard, on a hillside above Saratoga, in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

As a recent tasting of 28 vintages shows, Mount Eden's estate chardonnay is elegant and ageworthy, with tingly acidity, citrusy flavors, a note of minerality and a long finish. These are characteristics that show up year in and year out in the wines, which have their origins in a windswept, exposed site with low-fertility soils and no irrigation.

"It's not a style that's typical in California," says winemaker Jeffrey Patterson. "It's not a fruity style."

The site has been proving itself for decades. The vineyard was established in 1942 by the legendary Martin Ray. Ray had been an acquaintance of Paul Masson, a Burgundian who arrived in the San Jose area in 1878. In 1896, Masson purchased land in the hills above Saratoga and started what's now known as the Mountain Winery. Ray bought it in 1936, but a few years later he sold it and the Masson brand to Seagram's.

Ray took the money and bought land just north of his old winery. He planted chardonnay and pinot noir (cabernet sauvignon was added later) and built a winery. Ray was known for his high standards, adherence to traditional French methods and the high prices he charged for the wines he sold under the Martin Ray label.

He was also known for being difficult and mercurial, traits that didn't serve him well when he brought on some investors in the 1960s. The investors eventually kicked him off the property and renamed it Mount Eden Vineyards. The first Mount Eden vintage was 1972. Ray died in 1976.

At first, Mount Eden had a succession of winemakers. The late Dick Graff of Chalone Vineyards was a consultant for a while. Other winemakers included Merry Edwards, who now has her own label specializing in pinot noir, and Fred Peterson, who has a winery in Healdsburg. Patterson, who trained at the University of California-Davis, was hired in 1981 as assistant winemaker under Peterson. When Peterson left 15 months later, Patterson became winemaker.

The elevation of the vineyards at Mount Eden ranges from 1,600 to 2,000 feet, and the chardonnay is grown toward the top. Ray's old vineyard -- which Patterson says was "total, random confusion" -- has been replanted bit by bit over the past 20 years with more up-to-date spacing and trellising. The new chardonnay vines are descendants of cuttings Masson brought from Burgundy -- what's become known as the "Mount Eden selection." Mount Eden selection chardonnay is planted in many California vineyards.

Patterson says he puts most of his effort into the vineyard. The winemaking, he says, is low intervention -- "as low as you can get" -- because he wants the wine to reflect the special site. There is one winemaking step that sets it apart from other long-lived California chardonnays such as Stony Hill and Mayacamas, however: Those wines don't go through malolactic fermentation, a secondary fermentation in which tart malic acid is converted to softer lactic acid. The Mount Eden does go through ML. It's a little scary to think how tart it might be without it.

Late last month, Southern California physicist and wine collector Bipin Desai, who is known for organizing important retrospective tastings, put together a comprehensive look at Mount Eden chardonnay, dating back to 1976, at Spago in Beverly Hills. Nearly all the wines came from the winery and were in magnums (1.5 liters), which tend to age more slowly than 750-milliliter bottles, but the wines hadn't seen perfect storage -- until recently, the cellar where past vintages are kept wasn't refrigerated, and temperatures would fall as low as 45 degrees in the winter and climb as high as the low 70s in summer.

Nevertheless, the wines showed enormous staying power. Although the 1978, 1979 and 1980 had seen better days (and the 1977 was spoiled by a bad cork), the 1976, made by Edwards, was extraordinary: unctuous and rich, with a strong minerality.

Most of the rest of the wines from the 1980s are holding up well; some are still very tight and should continue to improve. The 1988, for example, was lean and minerally when first poured but opened up in the glass to reveal a lovely toffee note. The 1984 -- poured from a 750-milliliter bottle from a collector's pristine cellar -- seemed practically suspended in time; it was very pale and youthful-looking, with flavors that were still extremely fresh.

More typical of the wines from the '80s were the rich, smoky 1989; the racy, grapefruity 1986; and the fleshy yet vibrant 1985. I could count on one hand the number of California wineries whose 20-year-old chardonnays are still this fresh and lively.

The chardonnays from the early 1990s have fleshed out and taken on some smoky nuances. They're still evolving, and they change substantially as they sit in the glass. The flavorful, generous 1994 was a big highlight, as was the much more austere and structured 1995. The 1998 (from a much-maligned vintage) and 1999 are both displaying a wonderful balance of the yin and yang of richness and raciness.

The **2002 vintage (\$35)** is the one currently available. Although the wine poured at the Beverly Hills tasting was corked, I tasted the wine later from another bottle. The wine is showing a fair amount of oak now, but had the usual minerality and firm acidity. It will benefit from some more time in the bottle.

The 2003 was also poured at the tasting, offering a sneak peek at what's up next: a fresh, creamy, minerally chardonnay with lots of style and zing. In other words, exactly what you'd expect from this California classic.

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