

Wine Spectator

james laube's wine flights

Is Mount Eden California's Greatest Vineyard?

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Last night I dined with colleague Tom Matthews at Ken Frank's transplanted La Toque restaurant, which moved to Napa in September from its former digs in Rutherford.

It seems as if Frank's food keeps getting better. His new home is in the brand new Westin Verasa, which is perfect in many ways. I liked the rustic, country feel of the Rutherford setting, but it was time for a move and redesign. The relocated La Toque is more upscale with an entirely modern décor, with everything from the kitchen to the dining room built to Frank's desires. From our booth we could peer through a window and see Frank slicing and dicing and plating new entrees.

We uncorked a sensational bottle of wine, the **1997 Mount Eden Cabernet Sauvignon Santa Cruz Mountains Old Vine Reserve**, to go with our meal. Drinking this amazingly complex and exquisitely balanced youngster captures one style of California Cabernet – the Bordeaux model -- at its zenith. This wine is still tight, structured, deep and concentrated, offering a mix of both young currant, mineral and herbal notes, with some secondary cedar and cigar box scents, the kind of qualities more typically found in a great aged Bordeaux. Drinking it and marveling at its depth and nuances reminded me of something I've wanted to write for some time.

Every time I have a great aged Mount Eden wine – which is most of the time – I'm in awe of how well it develops. This is a unique property in the sense that all three of the major grapes grown there – Cabernet, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir – not only are distinctive and classy, but they age incredibly well. I often like the aged wines better than when they're released.

I suppose if one were to only collect wine from one vineyard, Mount Eden would be a tough choice to beat. There are many vineyards that produce two different types of wines of outstanding character. But few stretch into three and fewer still three great wines that improve with age. The Chardonnay evolves into a silky smooth, mineral gem. The Pinot is very tight in its youth and takes time to show its best. Yet with time it often softens to exhibit ethereal earthy, spice, berry and classic wilted rose Pinot flavors. (Writing this makes my mouth water.) I like the wines in the warmer years because they develop more flavors. In cooler years, the flavors are more subdued and the Cabernet in particular can offer a more herbal tobacco profile. This historic mountain vineyard is in one very cool climate.

Right now I'm thinking of a couple of vineyards that produce great grapes and in turn great wines. Hyde Vineyard in Carneros springs to mind. It grows exceptional Cabernet, Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc and Syrah, which is unusual. Rochioli in Sonoma's Russian River Valley grows great Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc. Peter Michael excels with Cabernet (Les Pavots), several Chardonnays and Sauvignon. But I'm not sure that wines from either of these stellar properties ages as well as those from Mount Eden.

Curious which vineyards that produce at least three outstanding wines from three different grapes would be on your list?