

# Wine Spectator

## Trailblazers of the Santa Cruz Mountains

Vintners just over the hill from Silicon Valley go their own way, but strive for recognition

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If there's one thing the vintners in the Santa Cruz Mountains like, it's their elbowroom. In the rugged heights southwest of San Francisco Bay, the nearest neighbor may be a mile away as the crow flies, but it takes a tedious drive on twisting roads to get there. "We're kind of like little islands spread out over the mountain," says Mount Eden winemaker Jeffrey Patterson.

Yet to those who reside here, this isolation is among the region's most important features. With the crowded sprawl of the Bay area just to the east, the remote geography gives the denizens of this lush, forested range a streak of stubborn independence that is common to mountain dwellers everywhere. The challenges are many, but the distinctive group of individuals drawn to this distinctive landscape know that the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation is capable of producing world-class wines.

The mountains were born from the collision of two tectonic plates whose boundary is California's most famous fault, the San Andreas (named for a lake in the northern reaches of the range). Despite ridgelines that climb above 3,000 feet, snow is a rarity in winter. Instead, rain can come down in torrents, flowing into dark canyons filled with towering redwoods. Summer sees almost no rain and is defined by cool fogs blowing in from the Pacific Ocean, which dissipate long before reaching the scorching valleys of California's interior. As a result, there's a constant ebb and flow of cool and warm air, with fog and sun in alternating supply.

The appellation comprises a varied and dramatic collection of geologies and sun exposures. Some of the soils are well-drained limestone and are perfectly hospitable to varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon. Other are less fertile, such as the widespread Franciscan shale substrate. Still others are poor, friable and steep terrains where grapegrowing is out of the question.

The eastern flanks of the range are the most protected from the Pacific wind and fog (and rain) and are generally best suited for Bordeaux varieties, while the western crests and slopes are cooler and traditionally considered the best locale for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Because of these variations, wines grown a mere mile apart can be quite different, though overall the region struggles to ripen its grapes. It's a large AVA, spanning three counties—Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Mateo—but because of the difficult terrain, only about 1,100 acres are planted to vines. Chardonnay is the leading variety in terms of acres planted, followed by Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir.

"A lot of people view the Santa Cruz Mountains as the New World's version of the Old World," says Kevin Harvey, owner of Rhys Vineyards. "The wines have a lot of site-driven character, a lot of mineral aspects, they're very ageworthy, [with] more tannin than what's typical in California."

As early as 1867 there were vineyards in these mountains, and people such as brothers John and George Jarvis were making wine. The original vineyards and winery at Monte Bello, now home to Paul Draper's Ridge label, produced their first vintage in 1892. Frenchman Paul Mason planted vineyards in the region just after the turn of the last century. Prohibition all but wiped out the original wine industry, but new pioneers such as Martin Ray revived the area, and in 1981 the Santa Cruz Mountains American Viticultural Area (AVA) was federally recognized.

Today, there are more than 40 small, family-owned wineries in the mountains, most of them mavericks in one way or another.

Harvey, for example, is part of a new generation of vintners investing large amounts of money in previously untried areas on the mountain. Mount Eden's Patterson is that rare winemaker who grows Cabernet, Chardonnay and Pinot on the same estate. Draper of Ridge Vineyards, one of the region's most familiar names, is known for his contrarian views on winemaking. There are old-timers like David Bruce who have been making wine in the hills for almost half a century, and vintners like Kathryn Kennedy, who is slowly being squeezed out by creeping development.

These are just five of the many vintners that call the Santa Cruz Mountains home, and in the following pages you'll become better acquainted with them. Just be sure to give them lots of space.

## **JEFFREY PATTERSON**

### **Mount Eden Vineyards**

When you're growing grapes in the Santa Cruz Mountains, you're either on the Bordeaux side of the hills or the Burgundy side. Unless you're Mount Eden winemaker and part-owner Jeffrey Patterson, that is. He proves himself the exception to the rule by making Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon.

"A serious wine connoisseur will always be giving me that look, 'How are you doing all three well?' And I say 'Hey, taste the wines.?' Patterson concedes, however, that his wines are stylistically out of the mainstream. "They don't fit into the plush, ebullient, very juicy mold of classic California, nor do they fit the more austere, more nuanced, kind of classic French style either. They're kind of a hybrid to me," he says. "That's what the vineyard gives me."

The Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays from Mount Eden are traditionally crisp and minerally, with a firm structure and a delicate underlying sense of fresh fruit. The Cabernets are typical of a cool climate, firm in tannin and tightly wound. All the wines are best when given extra time in the bottle. "Tannin management is a big issue, particularly with Cabernet," Patterson says. "I pick the Cabernet much riper than I used to, and as long as the crop level is maintained, ripeness is never an issue."

Located on the inland side and just up the mountain from Kathryn Kennedy, the vineyards of Mount Eden total about 40 acres and range in altitude from 1,600 to 2,000 feet. About 13 acres of Cabernet, Merlot and Cabernet Franc are planted at the lowest elevation and on the east edge of the site, where there's more sun and heat. At higher altitudes, the Pinot and Chardonnay sites are more westerly, where the stronger Pacific influence brings consistently cooler weather.

The vineyards of Mount Eden are believed to have the longest continuous history of growing Pinot in the United States. Winemaker Martin Ray planted the first vines, which were Pinot and Chardonnay, on the property in 1945, but his winery failed and new owners re-named it Mount Eden in 1972. Volatility continued as a series of winemakers, including Richard Graff and Merry Edwards, worked in the cellar. Finally, in 1981, Patterson came on board, fresh from studying enology at UC, Davis.

The youthful-looking 55-year-old Patterson and his wife, Ellie, make their home above Ray's original 1951 cellar, where barrels of the Cabernet are now aged. Production from the estate ranges from 4,500 to 8,000 cases annually. In 1991, Patterson added a cave, where he makes the wine and barrel-ages the Pinot and Chardonnay. From his rough and grape-stained hands, you can see that he is very much a hands-on winegrower.

While the entrance to the estate is on a country lane populated with upscale homes, the route to the winery stretches up a treacherous, winding gravel path best suited to an SUV. "It's remote. It's a very agrarian life, but I can't think of doing anything else," Patterson says. "The wines we make are distinctive and we're small and there's no market pressure, so I can do what I think is best."

## **DAVID BRUCE**

### **David Bruce Winery**

David Bruce, 76, is one of the pioneers of the modern era of winemaking in the Santa Cruz Mountains. He came to the region in 1961 and has been growing grapes and working in his cellar ever since.

Often ahead of the curve, he tinkered with white Zinfandel as early as the 1960s, and not many winemakers have an eponymous grape clone (in this case, a Pinot Noir clone casually called the "Bruce clone" for its preferred status with the winemaker). Along with fellow Santa Cruz pioneer Martin Ray, Bruce preached the gospel of Pinot long before it became chic. "Early on, I told a lot of people to plant Pinot, and many of them didn't listen to me," Bruce says. "Now they are."

His winery and vineyards sit in the heart of the mountains on Bear Creek Road above Los Gatos, at about 2,100 feet. Bruce cleared much of the land himself and planted the original vines on the steep hillsides. Today, he has about 15 acres of vines, mostly Pinot Noir but also Chardonnay and Syrah. Bruce originally planted Cabernet Sauvignon on the estate as well, but abandoned the idea early on. "It came out rather green," he says.

The label's Pinots have ranged from average to outstanding over the years. In recent vintages, Bruce has produced more good Pinots from regions such as Santa Lucia Highlands and Russian River than from his home vineyard. Jeannette, Bruce's wife of many years, is general manager of the winery and has watched Santa Cruz Mountains mature as a wine region. "In the old days, it was a very rugged life-style, very laid-back," she says.

Bruce has often looked beyond the Santa Cruz Mountains for grapes. For several years he produced large quantities of Central Coast appellation wines, but he is refocusing his efforts on specific regions such as Santa Rita Hills and is scaling back production from 80,000 cases annually to about 30,000. He recently bought 16 acres on Pleasant Road in Russian River Valley and plans to plant Pinot.

Bruce speaks with the careful precision of a doctor, which isn't surprising since he was a dermatologist for much of his life, retiring from medicine in 1985. Raised in a teetotaler family, he became interested in wine while a medical student. "I had two full-time jobs for 25 years, which helped [the winery] early on," he recalls. "But it wasn't very good on my first marriage, getting up at 3 a.m. to sulfur [the vineyards] and then spending all my weekends at the winery. But if you have the passion, what are you going to do?"

## **KATHRYN KENNEDY AND MARTY MATHIS**

### **Kathryn Kennedy Winery**

The clock is ticking at Kathryn Kennedy Winery. In the 34 years since Kennedy first planted her 7-acre vineyard, the McMansions of Silicon Valley have laid siege to the lower foothills in Saratoga, and now completely surround Kennedy and her vines. At age 80 and in declining health, and with her land valued at a couple million dollars an acre, Kennedy has come to terms with the inevitable. "When she goes," says her son, winemaker Marty Mathis, "this will go."

Kennedy, for her part, is not fettered by nostalgia. "Planting the vineyard was just an attempt to hold on to the land and make it pay for itself," says Kennedy, who nearly decided to grow Christmas trees. "I didn't go into the business for it to endure for generations. I was a single mom raising four kids. For me it was a matter of expediency."

Kennedy has certainly had a good run. The winery released its first wine with the 1979 vintage and continues to consistently produce one of the best Cabernet Sauvignons in Santa Cruz Mountains: deeply flavored, intensely structured yet supple, and offering a unique blend of spice, earth and minerality.

Driving west of Saratoga on Pierce Road, it's easy to overlook Kennedy's winery—except for 2 acres of vines out front it blends in with the other homes. Just inside the gate is the winery, little more than a glorified shed that even Mathis describes as "barebones and funky." The remaining vines are on a sloping hillside behind Kennedy's house. The soils—a mix of gravel, clay and sandstone—aren't particularly rich. "Our all time record was 2.5 tons an acre, in 2006," Mathis says.

Mathis makes about 800 cases annually from the estate vineyard, and except for a handful of experimental varieties, it's all Cabernet. "Mom came into the business when it was passé to blend in other varieties," he says. The winery also makes Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc, from fruit purchased from other vineyards around the state. The better part of its nearly 10,000 case production is the Bordeaux-style red blend Lateral, which carries a California appellation.

Mathis also has a side gig; ironically, it's making wine from small vineyards planted as landscaping around area mansions. "Hundreds of new vineyards like that have been planted in the past few years," says Mathis, who typically buys the grapes and makes a Cabernet blend under the Kathryn Kennedy label that he calls "Small Lot."

While Kennedy limits her participation in the winery these days, Mathis remains passionate. "He's much more enthusiastic about it than I ever was," Kennedy admits. As for the future, Kennedy has come to terms with the fact that her children will one day break up the estate. "But for now," she says, "I'm taking it year by year."

## **KEVIN HARVEY**

### **Rhys Vineyards**

As a venture capitalist, Kevin Harvey is used to taking risks, but he wasn't entirely prepared when the 2005 crop at Rhys Vineyards was hammered by June rain. "We lost most of the crop. We ended up with one barrel of estate wine," Harvey says. "That's the problem when you're out here on the [vicultural] edge. It makes the most interesting wine, but you have to take some risks."

Harvey's vineyards are only a few years old and are still establishing a foothold on the mountain. Part of a new generation of vintners in the area, Harvey has 42 acres of Pinot, Chardonnay and Syrah in five distinct locations, ranging in altitude from 400 to 2,300 feet and all within a few miles of Skyline Boulevard on the western edge of the crest that extends into San Mateo County. The area is greatly influenced by the Pacific and is generally cooler and foggier than more inland areas and often quite breezy.

"People think it's kind of crazy to invest this heavily in Santa Cruz Mountains when Napa and Sonoma wines sell themselves," says Harvey. "But I'm a Burgundy lover, and minerality and site-driven character are what get me really interested in a wine. After tasting and collecting all of California's regions, I fell in love with the earthy, iron, mineral aspect of Santa Cruz Mountain wines."

Harvey, 42, says he didn't originally intend to plant so many small vineyards but that he and general manager/vineyard manager Jason Jardine kept finding intriguing sites, each with different geology and microclimate but all with rocky and shallow soils that naturally produce low yields. The Home and Alpine vineyards are a few miles apart and quite distinct. Alpine fruit is dense and powerful, with generally black fruit and mineral and chalky qualities, while Home is more elegant, with earthy red berry fruit.

Jardine, 30, follows organic and biodynamic regimes in the vineyards, and while the wines are currently made down the mountain in San Carlos, Harvey is digging a 35,000 square-foot cave at Skyline Vineyard that will be home to the winemaking by 2009. Wine is fermented using indigenous yeast and in small 1-ton lots, and Harvey believes oak should be used sparingly; in fact he has his barrels made to order in Burgundy. "It's superexpensive to do it that way, but when you taste the wine we don't want you thinking about what barrel it was aged in," he says.

The winery made about 3,500 cases in 2006, with Pinot dominating production. Harvey also buys fruit from Kanzler Vineyard (in Sonoma) and other locales and bottles those wines under the Alesia label. When the estate vineyards are in full production, they will generate about 6,000 cases annually, with an ultimate goal of 10,000 cases between the two labels.

"I claim to be happy with the amount of vineyards I have now," Harvey says with a laugh, when asked about expansion plans. As his vineyards mature, he is learning more about this largely untried northern region of the mountains. "We haven't looked at any new land—this year, at least."

## **PAUL DRAPER**

### **Ridge Vineyards**

Paul Draper sweeps his hand across the horizon as if to brush aside the view and replace it with a memory. "When I first arrived," says Draper, looking down on the maze of homes and highways of Silicon Valley 2,000 feet below, "it was all prune trees, and in the spring it was all white with the blossoms. It was unbelievable."

A lot more than the view has changed in the nearly 40 years Draper has called Ridge Vineyards home. Born and raised on an Illinois farm, and with a college degree in philosophy rather than in enology or viticulture, Draper was just 33 when he became winemaker. Like a professor discussing a favorite topic, he speaks in soft and animated tones and a single question can lead to a voluminous and philosophical yet inevitably intriguing answer. He has always followed his own particular path and embodies the evolution of California wine from humble beginnings to international acclaim.

Draper has been at the forefront of many wine trends. In the late 1960s, when California was mostly churning out sweet and hearty jug wines, Draper was taking inspiration from Bordeaux; his Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon made deep inroads for the category, paving the way for the California cult wines. Yet while France is the inspiration, Draper ages Monte Bello almost exclusively in American oak, whereas most Cab producers prefer French oak barrels. He shuns the rich and plush style so popular today and continues to produce a wine with structure, focus and a sense of *terroir* unique to Monte Bello, a cool yet sunny mountaintop vineyard first planted in the late 1880s.

A self-taught winemaker, Draper was an advocate of naturally made wines long before it was the trend, convinced that the less he intervened in the vineyard and cellar, the better the wine. "After Prohibition, everyone was chanting about new, modern technology," Draper recalls. "California was not gently handling grapes for many years."

He has also been farsighted in his dedication to vineyard-designated wines, with the idea of capturing the distinctive, often idiosyncratic nature of a particular place. Fans of Ridge's old-vine Geyserville and Lytton Springs Zinfandels from Sonoma County can attest to that.

At 71, Draper remains intimately involved in the winery. When not traveling on winery business, he spends much of his time at Monte Bello, where for many years he has lived with his wife, Maureen, amid the vines.

Time seems to move a little more slowly at the top of the mountain, and the world sometimes seems far away, but all you have to do is consider the view to realize how much has changed in Santa Cruz Mountains.