

The Legacy of A Maverick  
A little vineyard keeps a dream alive

By MATT KRAMER

Saratoga, Calif.

It's no news that, as part of its fabled abundance, California has long cultivated its share of cranks and visionaries. One was Martin Ray who, back in the 1940s, started a winery on a mountaintop.

Mr. Ray was not the first such "mountain man" in California wine, but he was arguably among the most visionary—and crankiest, in every sense. Mr. Ray, who died in 1976, was by all accounts the kind of you-gotta-believe-this salesman who missed his calling selling tchotchkes on late-night television. A former stock broker, he knew about business, having bought the Paul Masson winery—itsself also originally located in Saratoga—from Paul Masson and eventually selling it to Joseph E. Seagram & Sons in 1943.



Mr. Ray first purchased 160 acres of oak-studded mountaintop high above Saratoga in 1942 and subsequently bought another 160-acre parcel lower down the slope. He then began to plant vines—Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon—which became the source of the distinction of the Martin Ray winery. Mr. Ray wanted wine greatness, and he never stopped telling people that he had grasped it. His wines, in fact, were famously variable. Some were indeed remarkable while others were just plain lousy. More than most wines by California producers at the time though, when Mr. Ray's wines were good, they were palate-smacking good.

Eventually, Mr. Ray, entangled in disputes with shareholders, left the winery, and in 1972 the winery morphed into what is now Mount Eden Vineyards. It, too, went through a fair amount of winery tumult, with several owners and winemakers before stability arrived in the mid-1980s. (The Martin Ray name still exists on labels, although unconnected to Mount Eden Vineyards; a Central Valley winegrower purchased the label as a brand for grapes grown in Sonoma County.)

Jeffrey Patterson, 57, the winemaker at Mount Eden since 1983, and his wife, Ellie, who handles the business side, are now the majority owners of Mount Eden. They preside over Martin Ray's original vineyard site, with 34 acres currently planted, and live in Mr. Ray's old house. The winery produces just 4,000 cases from the estate vineyard, plus another 16,000 cases from grapes purchased elsewhere. (The wines grown on the property are always identified on the label as "Estate".) In today's bigger-is-better California wine culture, where giants such as Gallo, Constellation Brands and Kendall-Jackson own dozens of wineries across the state, Mount Eden seems almost Hobbit-like in scale.

Finding your way to Martin Ray's old hilltop aerie involves more than the usual wine-touring effort. First, you get to Saratoga, an old logging town that turned genteel in the 1950s and then almost gold-plated in the 1990s, thanks to its proximity to nearby Cupertino and Apple Inc., which is just six miles away. After threading through a suburban sprawl of pseudo-Tuscan splendor, you see a street sign: Mount Eden Road. With that, not only do the McMansions disappear, but so too does the pavement. For more than two miles you jounce up a deeply rutted, serpentine dirt road that spirals its way to a 2,000-foot elevation where the winery and its famous estate vineyard reside. Suddenly, you are lofted into an almost monastic remove with

a sweeping view of the high-tech hubbub of Silicon Valley—but with the sound turned off, like viewing a distant galaxy.

What sets Mount Eden apart is its vineyard site. Although the vineyard's 2,000-foot elevation is surely influential (the normal lapse rate tells us that temperature drops 3.5 degrees for every 1,000 feet in elevation), what really makes Mount Eden different is its soil. "Effectively, we don't have much soil, at least as most people understand soil," says Mr. Patterson. "Our topsoil is between just one and 12 inches. Really, mostly it's just rock—Franciscan shale to be precise."

The result is a naturally low yield, meaning a small number of grape clusters per vine. In wine economics, how many or few clusters each vine proffers is the determining factor between success and failure. A low yield generally translates into higher quality grapes: A grapevine has only so much "oomph," and will typically deliver a better supply of nutrients, flavor and sugar to three or four clusters than it does to a dozen. The trick is to prune your vines so that the clusters per vine are few enough for quality but numerous enough for profit.

At Mount Eden, the challenge is keeping the yield up. "Typically we get one to two tons per acre, at most," says Mr. Patterson. "We're lucky if we even get close to two tons, actually." In comparison, vineyards on the Napa Valley floor routinely and easily get four tons an acre or even more.

The low yields make a big difference. The three varieties planted in the estate vineyard's 34 acres of vines—Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon—are all nuanced grapes, capable of expressing what might be called the "voice of the land"—but only when that voice is amplified by restricting the number of clusters per vine.

Mount Eden's most famous wine is its estate Chardonnay, which occupies 17 acres, half of the estate vineyard. Its yields are among California's lowest. So in order to keep its finances afloat, Mount Eden also offers three other Chardonnays: Saratoga Cuvée which is mostly barrels of wine from the estate vineyard that don't make the cut for the estate bottling; Wolff Vineyard Chardonnay from Edna Valley in the south central coast; and Zabala Vineyard in the Arroyo Seco zone of Monterey County. All of these Chardonnays are well received by critics and consumers, but the estate Chardonnay is the prize.

On my visit, Mr. Patterson hauled out his not-yet-released 2007 estate Chardonnay, the currently available (and thrilling) 2006 estate Chardonnay and a 1992 estate Chardonnay.

All were dense, even opulent wines suffused with a minerality rare in California (and more common in Burgundy). The two younger wines had focus and flavor delineation, where the scents and tastes of lemon and a whiff of hazelnut were delivered with almost digital precision.

But the 1992 estate Chardonnay was a wine in full, you might say, a complete experience where all the technical elements of balance, freshness and sheer savor are on display. What it had that the younger wines lacked was a dimensionality that takes time to unfurl from such a dense wine.

Mount Eden's estate Pinot Noir (five acres) has changed over the years. Where once it was a rather hulking item, always hinting at possibilities because of its earthy "savor of site," it previously lacked finesse and the full measure of berryish fruit that distinguishes this variety.

"I've really worked hard on the Pinot Noir," said Mr. Patterson. He now uses about 35% "whole-cluster" grapes in making the wine, which means that whole clusters of unruptured grapes still attached to the stems are included with the destemmed grapes during fermentation. This approach is thought by many winemakers to enhance the berryish quality of Pinot Noir, with the stems adding spice and floral notes.

His work has paid off. Having tasted decades' worth of Mount Eden Pinot Noirs, I'm prepared to say that the 2007 estate Pinot Noir is the best, most finesse-filled version I have yet tasted. It has a wild cherry scent and taste and a lip-smacking earthiness rarely found in most Pinot Noirs.

Cabernet Sauvignon (12 acres, including the blending grapes of Merlot and Cabernet Franc) is, for its part, perhaps the great Mount Eden secret. Here again, low yields and that unique soil makes the difference. Time is a necessity, though. Like a great Bordeaux, it's a wine that usually demands a leisurely stay in a cool cellar for its distinction to become apparent.

—Matt Kramer is a contributing editor with Wine Spectator and the author of the "Making Sense" series of wine books.

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Two Wines Worth Trying

**Mount Eden Vineyard Chardonnay 'Estate' 2006, \$48**

If you asked me to choose just one California Chardonnay to serve to a skeptical European (or any other doubter from anywhere), among currently available offerings, this 2006 bottling is what I'd reach for. To borrow from the U.S. Army: Is it all it can be? Not yet. But it sure is good now, with a luscious richness and a lemon and hazelnut scent. And it will assuredly be great in years to come, if you've got a cool storage space.

**Mount Eden Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 'Estate' 2005, \$50**

A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon (75%), Merlot (22%) and Cabernet Franc (3%), this 2005 vintage is exceptionally supple and forward by Mount Eden Cabernet standards. (The unreleased 2006 is sterner stuff.) Few California cabernets deliver this degree of elegance allied to a flavor distinction so clearly derived from a site (dare I say terroir?), with a you-can't-miss-it minerality and scents and tastes of red currant, blackberries and plums.