

Decanter



Producer profile: Mount Eden Vineyards

You might find boutique wineries of a higher profile in California, but since its Pinot Noir was served at last year's Royal Wedding, Mount Eden Vineyards has stepped firmly into the spotlight. Elin McCoy meets the husband-and-wife team behind its success...

Elin McCoy
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A week after [Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's wedding last year](#), Jeffrey Patterson, owner and winemaker of [California's](#) Mount Eden Vineyards, learned that the royal couple had served one of his Pinot Noirs at their wedding reception.

'It was like a judgement,' says Patterson. 'We were out front on the world stage.' With Mount Eden's long, layered, 75-year history and critically acclaimed, terroir-driven wines, it totally deserves to be there.

Patterson and his wife, Ellie, have been part of that history for nearly 40 years. You could say they've dedicated all their working lives to this winery and vineyards on an isolated ridge 600m up in California's rugged Santa Cruz Mountains, south of San Francisco. To get there, you drive up a steep, twisting, rutted dirt road. When you arrive you feel very far from the glitzy Cabernet stronghold of Napa and the laid-back [Pinot Noir](#) and [Chardonnay](#) haven of Sonoma. The aptly named Mount Eden is in serious mountain territory, well off the beaten track, though the dramatic views include the haze and suburban sprawl of high-technology epicentre Silicon Valley. It's worth the trip. For decades Mount Eden has been doing something highly unusual for a California boutique winery: making brilliant, long-lived Burgundian-style Chardonnays and graceful Pinot Noirs from its own vineyards, but also stunning, sinewy estate [Cabernet Sauvignons](#) that have [Bordeaux](#)-like ageability. Add to that a less expensive line of the same three varieties at the estate's nearby Domaine Eden, which are among California's best bargains. (The Domaine Eden Pinot was the New World wine served at the Royal Wedding.) Made in the traditional Old World style that is at last coming back into vogue in California,

they all have distinct identities that have won the estate a cult following and the enthusiasm of poet Ron Tanaka, who celebrated them in poems, photographs and collages.

Yet Mount Eden remains under the radar compared with many much-hyped Napa and Sonoma wineries, despite wines that are much better value.

French roots

Keen to understand the winery's heritage, I braved that road of hairpin curves. Patterson is a font of stories about the ways in which Mount Eden is tangled up with California's early wine history and two of the state's most colourful and visionary wine personalities: Paul Masson and Martin Ray.

Native Burgundian Masson arrived in California in 1878, established a winery, planted Chardonnay and Pinot Noir with cuttings obtained from his Burgundian pal Louis Latour, and pioneered the production of sparkling wine in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The boom and bust of the opinionated Ray resembles a Hollywood film in which an egotistical, wildly ambitious character ends up losing everything he worked for. A Masson protégé, Ray purchased Masson's wine company, and in 1943 he bought the undeveloped mountaintop that eventually became Mount Eden. He planted Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in 1945 with bud wood from Masson's vineyard, and for Cabernet he tapped the historic La Questa Vineyard in nearby



Mount Eden Vineyards barrel cellar

Woodside, planted with cuttings from Château Margaux.

Though it was the era of cheap jug wine blends, Ray pushed expensive 100% varietal wines that were sometimes fabulous and sometimes flawed, entertaining lavishly at the estate he named after himself.

His fatal mistake, says Patterson, was that he took on investors to fund expansion of the vineyards, and his financial shenanigans resulted in his partners seizing control of the winery in 1972, jettisoning Ray and renaming the winery Mount Eden.

The following decade was a time of financial and winemaking turmoil, with a new winemaker every couple of years.

Mount Eden Vineyards at a glance

Founded: Originally 1945; as Mount Eden Vineyards 1972

Owners: Jeffrey and Ellie Patterson, majority shareholders

Location: Santa Cruz Mountains AVA

Elevation: 610m

Vineyard size: Mount Eden 16ha; nearby Domaine Eden 22ha

Soil type: Franciscan shale

Grapes grown: Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay; also [Merlot](#) and [Cabernet Franc](#)

Annual production: 204,000 bottles, 25% under Mount Eden Vineyards label

Mount Eden Vineyards: a timeline

1933: Paul Masson suggests Martin Ray purchase land that later becomes Mount Eden Vineyards

1943: Ray starts planting Chardonnay, Pinot Noir

1950s: Ray builds house and winery, still in use

1955-1962: Ray adds Cabernet vines

1960s: Ray seeks capital partners, dreaming of a California version of DRC

1971: The Ray partnership collapses

1972: Remaining partners rechristen estate Mount Eden Vineyards; Richard Graff of Chalone hired

1974: Merry Edwards becomes winemaker

1981: Jeffrey Patterson is hired; Santa Cruz Mountains is now AVA; replanting begins

1983: Patterson becomes winemaker, Ellie business manager

1985: Edna Valley project with purchased grapes begins

2007: Cinnabar vineyards purchased, renamed Domaine Eden

2008: Pattersons become majority shareholders

2018: Mount Eden starts offering tasting experiences by appointment; son Reid joins the winery

The Patterson era

Then in 1981, Jeffrey Patterson was hired as a vineyard hand and cellar worker after he graduated from University of California at Davis. Mount Eden had only 10ha of vines, little money and broken-down tractors, but he says that his heart was captured by the property. Two years later he was named head winemaker and his wife Ellie became business manager. 'I had two days' training,' she recalls, laughing. 'I'd been a hand weaver and horticulturalist.'

'We never wanted to go anywhere else,' adds the low-key but intense Patterson.



Jeffrey and Ellie Patterson

After a couple of years, the partners pretty much left them alone to get on with things. When Robert Parker bought a case each of the 1986 Chardonnay and 1985 Pinot Noir the phone rang off the hook. To expand production, they purchased Chardonnay grapes from the Edna Valley on the Central Coast for a separate bottling.

Surprisingly, despite Ray's fascination with Pinot Noir, Mount Eden's Chardonnay quickly became its best-known wine; gaining attention for Cabernet took a little longer. 'This is not a "cookie cutter" valley floor Cabernet with all the plushness of your father's Oldsmobile,' Patterson once wrote, 'this is a "true" mountain wine with the precision, depth and acidity of your best friend's Ducati.'

There were plenty of additional financial complications along the way, including a 1986 bankruptcy, but slowly the Pattersons bought up shares and planned for the future. In 2007, they purchased nearby Cinnabar Vineyards to create a less expensive line of wines they called Domaine Eden. In 2008, before the financial crash, they sold everything they had to obtain the majority share.

Traditional values

The secret behind Mount Eden's success with all three varieties and the longevity of the wines is terroir: thin soils, cool microclimate, east-facing exposure, high elevation and long, slow ripening – plus Patterson's winemaking.

Established in 1981, the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA was among the first in California to be defined by mountain topography. Its boundary follows the morning fog line around the range. 'We have a moderate microclimate between the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay, which gives us a long growing season and good acidity,' explains Patterson. 'Our soils are old – the San Andreas Fault is one mile away – and the vineyards are dry farmed.'



Mount Eden Vineyards perches 600m up in the Santa Cruz Mountains

‘It took me almost a decade to really understand the vineyards,’ he adds modestly. ‘1990 was a watershed year. We finally got the techniques down for great Cabernet. Before, it was often delicious in the barrel, but too green when it was in the bottle.’ His most important decisions were to pick riper, manipulate the canopy so the grapes were exposed to more sunlight, and reduce the proportion of new oak to 25%. In 1993, the Cabernet blend from the replanted vineyard became standardised at 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot and 3% Cabernet Franc. Bit by bit, over nearly two decades, Patterson replaced Ray’s vines, mostly with cuttings from the original ones. He’s never wavered from a low-tech, non-intervention, balanced style of wine, even when the fashion was for fruit-bomb Cabernets, oaky-rich Chardonnays and Pinots that tasted more like Syrah. He’s a traditionalist, but over the years he has fine-tuned his winemaking. Since 2006 that’s meant only natural yeasts to ferment the grapes in small open-top fermenters and picking Chardonnay earlier. Since 2007, he’s used 30%-40% stems in his Pinots to give them, he says, ‘a higher level of complexity and liveliness, and more tannin and structure’.

The road ahead

The winery had no tasting room until just last year, when, explains Ellie, they began hosting tasting and tour ‘experiences’ by appointment in a handsome, serene room in an outbuilding as a way to draw in younger consumers.

The Pattersons have also solved one of the biggest problems California’s boutique wineries face: succession. Since many heirs don’t want to follow their parents’ winemaking dreams, a number of estates have been sold in recent years. Luckily, it doesn’t look like that will happen to Mount Eden. The Pattersons’ son Reid and daughter Sophie are also owners and have started to work at the winery. For the foreseeable future, the Patterson Mount Eden legacy is secure.

Elin McCoy is an award-winning journalist and author who writes for Bloomberg News