

# California: Four Decades of Mount Eden Vineyards



By MATTHEW LUCZY © Apr 18, 2024



Few California wineries can boast the longevity and consistency of Mount Eden, let alone pass it on to consumers for reasonable prices. Still, even fewer can do it with both Burgundy and Bordeaux varieties. In March of 2024, I spent an entire day with owner Jeffrey Patterson and his son, Reid, at the estate, tasting four decades of produce from this singular property.

Burgundian immigrant Paul Masson first showed interest in this hilltop in the late 19th century after establishing his sparkling-wine brand on an adjacent one, now known as The Mountain Winery. Through his friendship with négociant Loius Latour, lore has it that the original budwood for this site, and later Mount Eden, was sourced from Corton and Corton-Charlemagne.

Masson would later meet and mentor Martin Ray, a stockbroker whom Masson eventually convinced to purchase what is now Mount Eden when Ray decided to make a career change. He founded his eponymous label in 1945, which became something of a distant precursor to the cult wine movement: he sold the wines as futures, packaged them in lavish wooden boxes—bottled in champagne glass, no doubt a carryover from Masson—and commanded extremely high prices for the day. He eventually took on partners in the 1960s and, after a rocky string of negotiations, was replaced in 1972, the first vintage bottled under the Mount Eden name.

Jeffery Patterson's extensive tenure with Mount Eden began in 1981 when he joined the team as an assistant winemaker after graduating from UC Davis. In just 15 months, he was promoted to head winemaker and given shares in the business, replacing a rotating array of vintners overseen by Richard Graff of Chalone. Jeffrey's tenure brought an end to a tumultuous time at the property and the beginning of what would be a more than 40-year career.



*A section of Chardonnay vines*

The estate totals 300 acres, with 40 planted to vines, a sizable swath considering the region's extreme topography. The top of the property, at 2,000 feet in elevation, is planted to the Burgundian varieties: 20 acres of Chardonnay and seven acres of Pinot Noir across four vineyards each. Thirteen acres of Bordeaux varieties occupy two adjacent vineyards at the lower, warmer section of the property at 1,600 feet in elevation. The soils are primarily well-draining sedimentary Franciscan shale, and multiple exposures wrap around numerous ridges, with cooler, east-facing hillsides common.

The vineyards are mainly dry-farmed except in their infancy. The erratic nature of recent vintages has provided varying degrees of challenge in this endeavor: the 70-year average rainfall at the property is 35 inches, with wet years like 2023 reaching into the 50s and drought vintages receiving less than 20. 2014 was a record low of 14 inches, only to be eclipsed by a dismal 12 inches in 2021.





*Entrance to the Mount Eden cave*

The vinification techniques have been incrementally refined and adjusted, with Chardonnay remaining the most constant. The fruit is destemmed, crushed and then recombined with stems at pressing. Barrel fermentation occurs entirely in 40% to 50% new French oak, a combination of François Frères, some Sirigue and the recent addition of Damy. It spends 10 months in barrel without bâtonnage and undergoes complete malolactic fermentation.

Patterson takes great pride in the ageability of the Chardonnay, and there was no more incredible testament to this than the superb and ethereal 1988, made while own-rooted vines were still prominent before being replanted due to phylloxera pressure. I found the 2012-2014 era quite strong, as stressed, low-yielding drought vintages tend to produce this wine's most tensile and sturdy expressions. Better still is the stellar Reserve Chardonnay, in which 11 barrels are selected and transferred with their lees to stainless tank for an additional year. Throughout our extensive tasting, this wine was invariably more complete, complex and vibrant, sacrificing none of the honeyed, layered richness of the Estate bottling.

Pinot Noir has seen fluctuations mainly in its whole-cluster regimen. Patterson eliminated whole-cluster fermentation upon taking over in 1982, feeling that it gave the wines too much of a hard edge. Decades later, in 2007, he brought the practice back after joining a tasting group of Burgundian enthusiasts who successfully encouraged him to do so. This is a welcome addition, as the lacy, deft texture and aromatic lift imparted are well-suited for this site, with 2010 being a particularly great example. Pinot Noir is aged 18 months in French oak, averaging 50% new. Cooperage is divided between Billon, François Frères and small amounts of Sirigue.





While Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are often viewed as the beating heart of the property, I find the Cabernet Sauvignon blend relatively under-sung, especially considering that relatively fewer classically constructed examples exist in California. Emmet Rixford originally propagated the Bordeaux varietal cuttings at the La Questa vineyard in nearby Woodside before being obtained and planted by Martin Ray. This plant material is rumored to have come from Château Margaux and was planted in similar proportions: 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc and 3% Petit Verdot. Fermentation occurs primarily in 1,800-gallon stainless tanks with a seven- to 10-day maceration. The Cabernet is aged 22 months in 50% French (225-liter Éclat) and 50% American oak (265-liter Canton), racked up to five times throughout *élevage* and bottled without fining or filtration.

The Old Vine Reserve Cabernet was last produced in 2000 and is one of California's finest and most classic expressions of the grape. Aged entirely in new French oak, it was sourced from a single five-acre plot, the last remaining stake-trained vines planted in the late 1950s. The 1990 and 2000 vintages were among the most powerful and complex wines I've tasted from this property, and readers who enjoy possession of these bottles should have no doubts about their continued longevity.

The acquisition of the nearby Cinnabar winery and the founding of Domaine Eden alleviated logistical constraints that had grown in the preceding years and made the Reserve Chardonnay program possible. Starting in 2008, all red wine production is handled at the Domaine facility due to greater control over fermentation temperatures, and all white wine vinification is carried out in the cave system constructed at Mount Eden in 1991. Due to the extended aging of the Cabernet, "even" vintages are kept at Mount Eden and "odd" vintages are kept at Domaine.



A small portion of an extensive lineup

My tasting with Jefferey and Reid happened at the beginning of a transition period for Mount Eden. After initially toying with selling the

As readers will find in the plethora of notes accompanying this article, Mount Eden's combination of approachability and ageability is nearly constant. On balance, they occupy a Goldilocks zone, their wines neither lean nor ripe, shrill nor soft. While I find warmer, heat-spike vintages such as 2017 a bit less captivating, vintages on the other side of the ledger, such as 2011 and 2010, drink very well today and should continue to do so for years. In particular, the stretch from 2010 to 2014 best exemplifies the Mount Eden style across all varieties.

**NOTE:** This is one of three reports on the wines from the Santa Cruz Mountains published in this issue, along with [California: Exploring Obsession at Rhys Vineyards](#) and [California: The Undervalued and Overperforming Santa Cruz Mountains](#).



**MATTHEW LUCZY**

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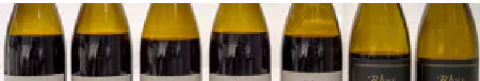
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