

# Portland Press Herald

## Wine: Up on Mount Eden, winemaking honors California roots

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By Joel Appel

In 1878, a Burgundian named Paul Masson came to San Jose, Calif., and started making wine. There had been winemaking in California before Masson — *vitis vinifera* grapes were first planted there in the 18th century by Spanish missionaries — and the first commercial winery opened in Napa (the town) in 1859.

But Masson, an outsized character, was one of the primary forces in making California wine (and “California Champagne”) big-time.

In 1905, Masson purchased land near Santa Cruz and built a “chateau” there. A guy named Martin Ray — by all accounts an especially brilliant, cranky, maddeningly mercurial man — started hanging around. Soon after Prohibition ended, he bought Masson’s company but wanted to do something different. Shockingly, Ray proclaimed he would produce wines made exclusively from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, rather than the mishmash of wacko varieties common at the time.

In 1943, Ray sold the Masson property (to Seagram and Sons) and purchased land nearby, on Mount Eden. Decades before the “Rhône Rangers” decided the Santa Cruz area was better suited to Syrah, Mourvedre and Viognier, Ray planted Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and later Cabernet Sauvignon. The great wines of Europe came from these varieties.

From the mid-1940s until 1970, Ray’s wines garnered accolades and adoration, as well as criticism and complaint. When good, they were brilliant; when not, they were cranky and maddeningly mercurial. At some point, all sorts of financial deals went bad, and the property emerged under new ownership as Mount Eden Vineyards.

A good deal of instability reigned for some time on Mount Eden until the mid-1980s, when Jeffrey Patterson took over the winemaking. Patterson has harnessed the promise in Mount Eden’s uniquely challenging terrain: At 2,000 feet above sea level with cool breezes blowing from Monterey Bay, a thin skin of soil covers what is mostly shale. Not a lot of nutrients, and therefore not a lot of yield. More flavor goes into fewer grapes.

This is not how it usually goes with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in California, with its viniferous foie-gras effect.

Mount Eden wines are not force-fed geese; they’re swans. The Chardonnays, lightly filtered and aged on lees, are exceptionally elegant. Chardonnay elegance is slippery, because with enough oak treatment and full malolactic fermentation, a wine made from sketchy grapes can seem elegant just because it’s viscous and richly flavored.

The Mount Eden Chardonnays are room-quietly elegant, quick-stepped tuxedoed dancers. Even the lower priced Domaine Eden 2009 (\$24) first expresses stones, earth and dried herbs. Then comes the fruit — ripe pineapple, truly nectary white nectarine — suffused with lemon juice. It’s rich, agave-licked wine, but with so much acidity you never grow tired.

The Mount Eden Estate Chardonnay (\$56) is achingly complex, with so many aromas and flavor notes my handwriting grew shaky when I tasted it: matchstick, smoke, ripe pears, corn, salt, ghee.

The Pinot Noirs, unfinned and unfiltered, are proper. This isn’t Burgundy, but I doubt Martin Ray was hoping to simulate Burgundy. He was hoping to make great wine in the land he loved. Jeffrey Patterson certainly is, and the wines are clearly, purely, land-based. The Mount Eden Estate Pinot Noir 2009 (\$53) has pronounced black truffle flavors, dark cherries, and just whirled you into its depths. It’s so probing and well integrated that you become part of its integration. I can only imagine what it’s like to taste this wine at the property itself.

There is a Domain Eden Pinot as well, for \$32, which, like the Domaine Eden Chardonnay, is a financially easier way to ascend the mountain and experience its terroir. Also like the Domaine Eden Chardonnay, the fruit is all from the same estate vineyard sites originally purchased by Martin Ray in the 1940s that make it into the more expensive Mount Eden line. This 2010 Pinot is more syrupy than the Mount Eden, expressing more fruit (less earth) and on a strawberry plane. It tastes like a younger wine, but younger in a soft, hushed way.

And yes, the Domaine Eden Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 (\$57). Only four years old, this Bordeaux blend (it has 16 percent Merlot) already has the maturity and integrity of great Cabs at least twice its age. The tannins are polished but persistent enough to help it age another five years at least. Plums and blackberries announce early, backed by mint but with very little of that off-putting greenness endemic to too many Cabs. My tasting notes include a final word written big and underlined twice: REAL.

And that’s how it is with all these wines. They link you to something older, less adulterated and less managed. They quite literally come out of American history, tied to Europe but somehow free of it, too. The Wild West was tamed, probably too much, but it wasn’t laid flat.

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