

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Mount Eden Chardonnays stand test of time Acidity helps Mount Eden Vineyards wines stay fruity

[Linda Murphy, Chronicle Wine Editor](#)

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**Beverly Hills** -- It was a first for wine aficionado extraordinaire Bipin Desai, who since 1982 has hosted fellow collectors, wine professionals and consumers at more than 70 major tastings of wines -- some provided from his cellar, others by some of the world's finest producers.

Most of his tastings have been of red wines. Desai, a Riverside physicist, is a red-wine man, and reds stand the test of time better than whites. He had put together white Burgundy and Champagne tastings, but not one of California Chardonnay.

So it was with some trepidation that Ellie and F. Jeffrey Patterson of Mount Eden Vineyards presented 28 vintages of their estate Chardonnay for Desai and about 40 guests at a dinner at Spago Beverly Hills in late July.

"It's the first California Chardonnay (retrospective) tasting I've ever done," Desai said that night, "and Mount Eden is the greatest Chardonnay made in California."

Mount Eden is joined by a handful of California producers (among them Stony Hill Vineyard and Mayacamas Vineyards in Napa Valley and Hanzell Vineyards in Sonoma Valley) that make Chardonnay meant for the cellar. In fact, these wines demand cellaring, for their taut, steely structure, lean fruit and firm natural acidity relax and become more accessible with time.

Mount Eden was founded by Martin Ray, the protégé of Burgundy-born California winemaker Paul Masson, in the Santa Cruz Mountains high above Saratoga. In 1942, Ray planted Masson cuttings of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir on a 2,000-foot-elevation site on Mount Eden; the wines were labeled "Martin Ray."

Ray lost the vineyard to investors in 1972, the name was changed to Mount Eden Vineyards, and a series of winemakers, including Merry Edwards, Richard Graff and Fred Peterson, made the wines until the arrival of Jeffrey Patterson.

"The style has not changed in 25 years," says Patterson, who joined Mount Eden in 1981 as the assistant to Peterson and became wine-maker in 1983. "The alcohols (in each vintage) are 13.5 to 13.9 percent, and the wines are lively, youthful, complex and aging gracefully."

They show a lemony, unripe tropical fruit character and racy acidity when young; in typical vintages, the flavors get riper and richer at about eight to 10 years in the bottle, yet the refreshing acidity remains. This is the antithesis of most California Chardonnay, which is made to be consumed young.

In the Desai tasting, some wines, such as the 1978 through 1980 Chardonnays, were over the hill, tired and devoid of fruit -- yet the 1976 was still incredibly vibrant. With the exception of the 1984 vintage, the wines were poured from magnums (the equivalent of two 750-ml bottles), which allow wine to age longer than 750s do. The current-release 2002 Mount Eden Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$35) was marred by cork taint and was not evaluated.

### Tasting notes from selected vintages of Mount Eden Chardonnay:

2001 -- Fine balance, with a toasty, smoky, nutty nose yielding to bright citrus fruit on a lean, refreshing body.

2000 -- Quite complex, with butter, toffee, crème brulee nose and pineapple, peach and yellow citrus palate. Great balance, long finish, mouth-watering acidity.

1998 -- Gorgeous, complex nose of egg custard, flint and ripe citrus. Palate is more subdued, with soft yellow stone fruit and citrus and less acidity than most of the other bottlings.

1996 -- A standout. Aromas of flowers, nuts and citrus lead to a full, fleshy palate of nectarine, apricot, lemon and hazelnut; lingering finish.

1991 -- Unctuous, rich tropical fruit aromas and flavors plus citrus and green apple and a very long finish.

1990 -- A big wine yet balanced, with ripe tropical and citrus fruit, hazelnut nose and mineral finish. Doesn't taste 15 years old.

1989 -- A wet, difficult vintage didn't stop Patterson from delivering a gem. Fresh and lively, with lemon curd, honey and toffee notes and crisp acidity.

1987 -- Another favorite, with layers of juicy yellow stone fruit and lemon meringue flavors. Vanilla and caramel add complexity.

1984 -- Light and lively, with lemon and lime flavors and a mouthwatering finish. An elegant old-timer.

1982 -- Very fragrant, with a slight sherry nose, rich pineapple and apricot fruit and a nice balance of minerality and crisp texture. A standout.

1981 -- Delicate in weight and texture, with fading citrus fruit and a classic mineral character.

1976 -- Get past the weedy aroma and this wine delivers lively, rich tropical fruit and fresh acidity. Holding up remarkably well, but drink now.