

# Santa Cruz Sentinel

## Wine Press: Santa Cruz Mountains appellation known for pinot but don't forget cabs

By [Stacey Vreeken](#), *Wine Press*

POSTED: 11/25/14

While the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation is primarily known as a pinot noir region, it has an amazing history of producing world-class cabernet sauvignon from the eastern side of the range.

“(Cabernet sauvignons) tend to age well, are very individualistic. They generally reflect their unique personalities pretty well,” says Jeffrey Patterson, winemaker for Mount Eden Vineyards. “In the world of California cabernet, we’re different. We’re on a coastal mountain range.”

The huge Santa Cruz Mountains appellation, which reaches into Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, runs the gamut of warm to cold sites.

“We’re not like Napa or Bourdeaux, where you have one vineyard after another all doing the same type of wine,” he says. “Here you have miles and miles of forest (between vineyards).”

Mount Eden and Katherine Kennedy were among 15 wineries recently offering a taste of their flagship wines at Premier Cruz, sponsored by the Santa Cruz Winegrowers Association.

Patterson took a stab at explaining the challenging conditions and attributes that define cabernets from the Santa Cruz Mountains American Viticulture Area.

“For cabernet, you have to have the right site, and you have to wait for the vines to mature. Then the wine spends two years in the cellar. Even though cab prices are higher than pinot, expectations are higher,” he says. “If you don’t know what you’re doing, you can fall flat on your face.”

Patterson, whose historic vineyard has ties to wine giants Paul Masson and Martin Ray, recently added more cabernet sauvignon vines to the vineyard in the hills above Saratoga.

The vines are planted in fairly infertile soils, dry farmed, resulting in small vines, small berries and small yields. Small berries translate to structured wines, says Patterson, with lower alcohol and more aggressive tannins.

When tasting, Patterson says he thinks the wines are in more of an Old World style, angular and complex, rarely soft.

“Each one is uniquely what it is,” he says. “Even though there is a common thread, there’s a unique flavor to every one.”

These long-aging attributes were essential to Ridge Vineyards’ inclusion in the Judgment of Paris in 1976, setting California wines against French, and in Ridge taking fifth place at the time, then taking first 30 years later with the same wine, firmly establish Santa Cruz Mountains cabernet as truly premier.

“There was a time when cabernet sauvignon was very important for this region, and we don’t want that to be lost,” says Marty Mathis, who was raised at and now owns Katherine Kennedy Winery in Saratoga.

“Because there are few producers like myself who specialize in cabernet, we don’t want that part of this region’s reputation to be lost,” he says, noting that while Santa Cruz Mountains AVA is certainly known for its pinot noir, cabernet has a long history here and still thrives.

“The real attraction (to our cabernets) is a style halfway between Bordeaux and Napa. It has classic, traditional Bordeaux character ... sophisticated, precise, elegant,” says Mathis, but he adds that the chocolate and blackberry notes are Californian.

The winemaker describes the cabernet sauvignons that come from a region in the middle of the appellation as long-lived, tending to develop over 20 years, just as the Ridge wine showed.

Mathis says they have natural acids that give a longer presence in the mouth, are “delineated, never fat, never round and plumb drawn out, expressing itself over a much longer period.”