

Wine Spectator

An Act of Faith

James Laube

Issue: March 31, 2016

Updated Feb. 17, 2016

There's a new stretch of pavement leading to Mount Eden Vineyards in California's Santa Cruz Mountains. The road is smoother in parts, making travel easier. But it's still a steep hang-on-for-your-life ascent that leaves the suburbs of Saratoga and Silicon Valley below. It's the path that legendary winemaker Martin Ray chose when he founded the property under his own name in the 1940s, only to run it into bankruptcy, triggering a messy legal battle and effectively destroying the brand.

Ray died in 1976, just as California's wine boom was taking off. His winery had reemerged in 1972 as Mount Eden, but it took another decade to settle matters and get the property back on track. Richard Graff and Merry Edwards were among those who tried to right it. By 1981, Mount Eden began its renaissance under the guidance of the Patterson family, who faced a neglected vineyard with antiquated equipment. Jeffrey became winemaker and Ellie managed the business, steering the winery on a new course and undoing most of the damage Ray had caused.

Ray's romantic flair and passion for the mountains made him a visionary. He had been a protégé of pioneering vintner Paul Masson, himself an adventurer who came to California from Burgundy at age 19 in 1878, bringing cuttings of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from his homeland. Prohibition shuttered his aging winery, and Masson reluctantly sold it to Ray.

Ray acted on Masson's advice to buy and plant the 160-acre mountaintop property that ultimately became Mount Eden. Some of Ray's wines were brilliant. Many were undrinkable.

His worst maneuver was a shaky real-estate deal in the 1960s to finance the estate's expansion. Investors confident in his talents lent him money, yet there was no clear title or exit strategy. The partnership dissolved amid protracted legal conflicts that took decades to resolve. Still, the tie that binds Masson, Ray and the Pattersons is the vineyard, along with a commitment to classic European grapes and winemaking styles.

"We're about classicism," says Jeffrey, 63. "And the thing about classicism is longevity. If a wine is really good it ages." And his wines do. He is still a believer in the traditional style. The Chardonnays in particular begin life tight and lean and require a few years to blossom. The Cabernets can last for decades.

Yet the wines' longevity also reflects their terroir, something Patterson had to learn. He wanted to impose his style on the vineyard, initially aiming for a leaner, high acidity style like the French wines he enjoyed. He found, however, that the vineyard allowed for a richer style because the soil is uncommonly thin. "We don't have much," he says. "It's mostly rock."

Mount Eden totals 34 acres of vines: 7 acres of Pinot, 20 of Chardonnay and 13 of Bordeaux grapes. All three wines are as European as they get in California, all selling for \$60. The Chardonnays are vibrant and

expressive, with citrus, lemon-lime, lemon curd, white peach and stone fruit flavors that are tight and persistent.

Both the 2011 and 2012 Chardonnays rated 95 points, with the latter earning the No. 5 spot on Wine Spectator's 2015 Top 100. The Pinot is more delicate and transparent in color and weight, more Burgundian in spirit, and the Cabernet is reminiscent of Bordeaux, austere and cedary with cigar box nuances.

The economics of running a small vineyard have led the Pattersons to expand. The Domaine Eden line includes more approachable bottlings.

Under Patterson, Mount Eden has been running smoothly since the 1990s. The wines are widely admired for their authenticity of style, reflecting the austerity of the coastal mountains.

A measured precisionist, Patterson is the opposite of the eccentric Ray. Compared with the quirky personalities who populate the winery's history, Patterson is the epitome of steady and consistent. Yet his wines validate the vision and foresight of those who came before him. Because of the estate's remote location, the wines perhaps remain underappreciated, except by those drawn to the classics.

Senior editor James Laube has been with Wine Spectator since 1981.

