

Mount Eden Vineyards: Comparing the Cabernets 1990-2000

Eleven vintages of Mount Eden's two Cabernets, including every Old Vine Reserve vintage ever made...

Elin McCoy March 19, 2019



Jeffrey Patterson was hired as Mount Eden's assistant winemaker in 1981 and was promoted two years later.
Credit: mounteden.com

Owners Jeffrey and Ellie Patterson had lined up the 22 wines on a long table in their light-filled home, with views of vines from every window and a panorama of Silicon Valley far below...

Some of the first great California Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Cabernets I tasted back in the 1980s were from Mount Eden Vineyards. Perched at an altitude of over 600 metres on an isolated ridge in the remote Santa Cruz Mountains, the winery already had superstar status thanks to its colourful history and classic wines.

And as I discovered last October, getting to it still means driving up a steep, twisting dirt road that even challenges a four-wheel drive vehicle. I persevered through bumps and hairpin turns though, because

awaiting me was an extraordinary opportunity to compare the Estate Cabernet and the Old Vine Reserve Cabernet, from 1990 to 2000 – the only decade when Mount Eden made both wines. The Pattersons had been there since 1981, but the estate began more than three decades before that, when opinionated visionary Martin Ray founded it under his own name in 1945. He started by planting Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and in the 1950s, Cabernet Sauvignon, sourced from cuttings from the historic La Questa vineyard in Woodside, California, which in turn had obtained cuttings from Château Margaux in the 1890s.

Ray eventually lost control of the estate to his investor partners, who changed the name to Mount Eden Vineyards in 1972 and brought in a series of winemakers, culminating in Jeffrey Patterson.

‘1990 was a watershed year,’ says Patterson. ‘We finally got the techniques down to make great Cabernet.’

And it was in that year that Mount Eden’s Estate Cabernet, a 100% Cabernet Sauvignon wine made from the remaining 2ha of old vines Ray had planted, was renamed Old Vine Reserve Cabernet.

In its place, a new Estate Cabernet was introduced, sourced from a vineyard planted a decade earlier that preserved the original grape lineage by using cuttings from Ray’s vines, but also included Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

But by the late 1990s, yields of the Old Vine Reserve Cabernet were getting lower, producing only 300 to 500 cases a year. The decision was made to pull up Ray’s vines after the 2000 harvest, ending the estate’s decade-long, dual-Cabernet wine production.

Vibrant

The biggest differences between the two Cabernets boil down to vineyard source, age of the vines, blend, and to a certain degree, style, and comparing the two wines was fascinating.

The soil type and microclimate are just about the same for both dry-farmed vineyards. The wines were handled the same way in the cellar and both are restrained, balanced and elegant. The wines from younger vines tend to be brighter, fruitier and reflect a blend that includes Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Some don’t have quite the same depth as the Old Vine Reserve, but in a few vintages I actually preferred the Estate cuvee.

What surprised me most was how vibrant all the wines still are. I certainly didn’t expect the several I last tasted a decade ago to live for so long. And neither, based on his original tasting notes, did Patterson.

The Old Vine Reserve Cabernet is certainly more collectible, as it was produced in much smaller quantities, but aficionados of California wines should hunt down both Cabernets – they show how just how brilliantly balanced, elegant Cabernets from California can age and, of course, they’re delicious right now.

Comparing Mount Eden Cabernet Sauvignon:



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1990 93 Points

Deep, mineral, cedary, and complex, Mount Eden's first vintage from the vines Patterson planted in 1980 has a wonderful lush core of ripe fruit and a savoury, succulent finish. It isn't quite as intense or plush as the Old Vine Reserve from the same year, but it's perfectly mature right now. The growing season was long, with perfect growing conditions and a harvest on 10 and 11 October.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2032



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1990 97 Points

The first vintage to be designated Old Vine Reserve sets the tone: it's all Cabernet and a stunning classic, with an expansive bouquet of warm, rich berries, lead-pencil shavings, mint, tobacco and cassis. The palate is pure, with very complex flavours of dark fruit and earth. It still shows plenty of tannin, acidity and fruit, with a longer finish than the regular Estate bottling, and it's more structured even than some younger vintages. Only 448 cases were made. Drinking Window 2019 - 2045



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1991 90 Points

The long, cool growing season and very late harvest in 1991 produced an abundant vintage and a wine with lots of nuances of flavour. It's still very intense, with plummy fruit, cassis and a little mineral-iron tang to the nose, plus appealing warm fruit spreading on the palate and a soft, fully mature texture. There's elegance too, but I slightly prefer the Old Vine Reserve in this vintage.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2030



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Drinking Window 2019 - 2030



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1992 91 Points

Rich and full of flavour, this vintage is riper than the 1991 and California in style but very, very elegant and succulent. It's open and ageing wonderfully, with a nose of berries, cedar and earth, followed by fruit smokiness on the palate. This has higher alcohol than most other vintages of the early 1990s. Like the Old Vine Reserve, it was fermented slowly for two weeks then pressed into French oak barrels. Drinking Window 2019 - 2034

Continued:



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1992 **96 Points**

This vintage of Old Vine Reserve is one of Patterson's favourites and it definitely outshines the Estate bottling right now, though the winemaking is the same. Think of it as Bordeaux with a dose of California - very long and intense, it still has power and spice, as well as a pretty sweetness. And though softly textured, it's still surprisingly young. The vintage benefitted from beautiful autumn weather. Production was 450 cases. Drinking Window 2020 - 2040



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1993 **91 Points**

This is the first year that Patterson settled on a standardised blend: 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot and 3% Cabernet Franc – a blend which remained the same until 2007. In this vintage, the Estate and Old Vine Reserve cuvees seem more similar in character than many vintages, though the Estate is more mineral-toned and broader now. It was a normal year, with an October harvest and an average crop. Drinking Window 2019 - 2035



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1993 **93 Points**

The grapes for the Old Vine Reserve ripened well after those for the Estate during a long, warm Indian summer. Right now the wine still seems very young, with almost grainy tannins and Mount Eden's typical cassis and earthy-mineral nuances. It's more powerful, plush and succulent than the 1992 but it's not as long or intense. Is the Reserve's individuality due to the vines being planted on their own roots? Drinking Window 2020 - 2042



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1994 **96 Points**

1994 was a stunner for California Cabernets, and this wine is no exception. The growing season was long, with a mid-to-late October harvest. I prefer the Estate to the Old Vine Reserve right now - it's softer and more developed, and not only has a tantalising, perfumed nose of cedar, mint and cassis, but it also has a lush, fruity charm with a deep, powerful structure and a finish that goes on and on. Drinking Window 2019 - 2050



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1994 **92 Points**

It will be interesting to see how the 1994 continues to develop. Technically, it was a drought year with low rainfall, a cool growing season and a late October harvest, with quality rivalling that of 1990. The Old Vine Reserve is super intense and bright, with floral and spice aromas and vibrant, young, fruity flavours. It has elegant balance and is ageing slowly, but right now the Estate bottling is showing better. Drinking Window 2020 - 2045

Continued:



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1995 **92 Points**

This long, cool, very classic year gave an abundant crop at the end of October. It's an old world, Bordeaux-style vintage, mouth-filling and pretty, with a bouquet of violets and mint followed by a lovely core of lifted lush fruit, spice and chocolatey notes, leading to a seamless finish. The Old Vine Reserve offers much more complexity, however. Drinking Window 2019 - 2040



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1995 **95 Points**

The vibrant, deep, elegant wine from this long, cool vintage with harvest at the end of October is one of my favourites. It's rich and plush yet very vibrant, with layers of cherries, plums, cassis, cigars, mint and more. There's plenty of structure and an elegant silkiness to the tannins, and it's going to live a long, long life. Drinking Window 2019 - 2040



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1996 **91 Points**

This was a very ripe, warm year with a September harvest. Despite all the wine's concentration and sweeter fruit than usual, the alcohol level is a very balanced 12.8%. It still has a very rich colour and is packed with plush fruit and broader flavours than I usually find in in Mount Eden's Cabernets, but it has the typical cedary, spicy, almost minty nose. Drinking Window 2019 - 2035



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1996 **92 Points**

This vintage of the Old Vine Reserve is very similar to the Estate wine in character and structure, but is darker, denser, deeper and more massive. It has plenty of grippy tannins as well as olive intensity and a bouquet of fresh green herbs and earth. The yields were less than one ton per acre, which surely helped the grapes' concentration. Only 301 cases were made. Drinking Window 2019 - 2040



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1997 **95 Points**

This was a benchmark year, with early bud-break and an early, mid-September harvest with an abundant crop of ripe grapes. Patterson called the weather 'a winemaker's dream,' with a degree of ripeness not seen since 1980. This is a very plush, lush, big-fruited wine with lots of power and intensity, and polished tannins. I think it has less finesse than the Old Vine Reserve, but both are crowd-pleasers in this vintage. Drinking Window 2019 - 2045

Continued:



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1997 95 Points

This was one of the earliest Cabernet harvests in history, and the wine still has a gorgeous colour and a youthful, exuberant character. It's just beginning to open up, and compared to the Estate bottling it has a longer finish and darker tone, with exceptional richness and deep, complex layers of very pure fruit overlaid with notes of tobacco, dark earth and cedar. It's surely going to last a very long time. Drinking Window 2019 - 2050



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1998 90 Points

This was an El Nino year, with record rainfall in the Bay Area, falling every day as drizzle. The small, late crop struggled to ripen and harvest didn't occur until November. It was the lightest vintage of the 1990s, panned by the press at the time. But even though this has less weight and density than usual, it's balanced and classy with a lean elegance, spicy flavours and a fairly long finish. Drinking Window 2019 - 2034



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1998 91 Points

Constant rain throughout the growing season had Patterson concerned that the grapes wouldn't ripen, and the harvest for the Old Vine Reserve was late in November. Still, the quality of the site comes through in the dark, spicy, curranty flavours of currants, spice, cedar and cassis bouquet. It's more delicate and lighter in style, but harmonious, balanced and ready to drink now. I prefer it to the Estate, but not by much. Drinking Window 2019 - 2035



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1999 93 Points

Marked by a very cold winter and spring - it snowed in April - 1999 saw a very late bud break and a harvest in November, one month later than normal. The wine has an expansive berry and spice aroma, while the palate is rich and smooth, with a very dark colour and lots of delicious, plush berry fruit. This is another year in which I prefer the Estate to the Old Vine Reserve. Drinking Window 2019 - 2035



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 1999 93 Points

After a cold winter and spring, bud-break was late and the growing season extended to a November harvest. Yields were below one ton of grapes per acre. The wine has darker, slightly more savoury flavors than the Estate bottling, with a very intense bouquet of spice and berries. The Estate bottling has more plushness and richness and I slightly prefer it right now. This will last a long time. Drinking Window 2019 - 2045

Continued:



Mount Eden Vineyards, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 2000 94 Points

2000 was a normal year, with everything happening on schedule and a September harvest of grapes with average ripeness. The vines for the Estate bottling were nearly 20 years old at the time, and coming into their own. And it shows in the elegant structure and concentration of this gorgeous, dark-coloured wine. An iron tang and plenty of rich blackberry and cassis stand out on the nose and plush palate. Drinking Window 2019 - 2040



Mount Eden Vineyards, Old Vine Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, Santa Cruz Mountains 2000 94 Points

2000 was the swansong vintage for the old vines - they were pulled up after the harvest in September. At this point they were only producing half a ton per acre, so there were a mere 218 cases of this big, intense wine with lovely sweet blackberry fruit and tannins that are still a bit grippy. There's tons of structure, and so this should last and last. It's a fitting end for the old vines. Drinking Window 2019 - 2045