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The tasting room: Turn back time at Martin Ray

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Martin Ray Winery is the kind of place where you can still buy a \$13 jug of decent red wine.

Most days, Luke Anderson stands behind the redwood tasting bar in the small, plain tasting room. If things aren't too busy he'll take visitors into the long string of low, old wooden buildings that make up the huge winery for a taste from the barrel while he fills a few jugs, sold under the Fountain Grove label.

The jug wine harks back to the winery's long existence in an out-of-the-way pocket of Sonoma County where the Russian River Valley begins.

Martin Ray's claim to fame is that it's the oldest "continuously operated" winery in the area. According to winery lore, it was founded as Twin Fir in 1881, and it was owned by succeeding generations of the Martini family and run as Martini & Prati. The Martinis were able to keep the winery in production through Prohibition by making sacramental wine.

The third, fourth and fifth generations of Martinis still live on the 140-acre property. But in recent years, they've leased the winery to various concerns.

Since July 2003, the winery and about 10 acres of vineyards have been under long-term lease (with an option to buy) to Courtney Benham of Mill Valley, one of a pair of brothers who founded Blackstone Winery in Kenwood and sold it to Constellation Brands.

Benham named his new winery after Martin Ray, who was a maverick Santa Cruz winemaker in the 1960s. Benham bought rights to the name, according to the winery's Web site, but it has no connection to Martin Ray's original winery in Saratoga, which is now Mount Eden Vineyards.

The vibe: A visit here is low-key and friendly. You might arrive to find a sign saying "out filling a jug" on the tasting room door if Anderson has stepped out from behind the tasting bar to show visitors the old redwood fermentation tanks (some still in use) or give them a taste from the barrel.

The team: Founder Benham grew up in Bakersfield, then learned the wine biz in his parents' Barengo Winery in Lodi. After he and his brother Derek sold Blackstone, he started Martin Ray and Derek started Purple Wine Co., which owns Avalon, Mark West and Rock Rabbit. The winemaker is Bryan Davison, a veteran who has worked for Chateau St. Jean, made wines in custom crush operations and supervised the winemaking at Pacific Wine Partners in Graton, a Constellation company.

The wines: Martin Ray produces about 250,000 cases a year under its Martin Ray, Angeline, Courtney Benham and Ugly Duckling lines.

The tasting room focuses on the Martin Ray and lower-cost Angeline lines, which vary widely in variety and style. A visitor can taste four out of eight bottles open each day - for free. The day we visited, the selection ranged from a 2006 Angeline Russian River Valley Pinot Noir and the Red California Table Wine 1-liter jug, a blend of Syrah, Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon to a 2003 Martin Ray Diamond Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon. Occasionally, a Courtney Benham wine will be available for tasting.

The experience: Luke Anderson mans the tasting bar five days a week, and is a fountain of information about the winery and the wines. If it's not too busy, he'll take visitors on a winery tour, stopping by historic photos hung outside the winery door.

The extras: A picnic table offers vineyard views. A few T-shirts are offered for sale.

Nearby: Woodenhead Vintners (5700 River Road, Santa Rosa; 707-887-2703), Joseph Swan Vineyards (2916 Laguna Road Forestville; 707-573-3747).

RATING KEY

6666 Extraordinary 666 Excellent 66 Good 6 Fair B Poor

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All expenses are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a single visit.

Martin ray winery

2191 Laguna Road, Santa Rosa

martinray-winery.com, (707) 823-2404

Open 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Thursday-Monday (Nov.-March), 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily (April-Oct.)

Rating: TWO STARS

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