

Wine Tasting Room of the Week

Martin Ray Winery

By James Knight



Martin Ray Winery

Time was when folks could drive up to their local winery, bring their empty gallon jugs and have them refilled straight from the barrel. In fact, time was not so long ago when one of these old family wineries still offered the bulk gallon deal in this century. I thought that that operation was gone, replaced by a “brand name” transplanted in time and place. But just as Martin Ray is there in name and spirit only, it seems that the old Martini & Prati winery has gone in name only. On a rainy day mission to investigate, I found this old local favorite is a genuine, friendly and renewed favorite in its new guise.

Martin Ray believed he could make the world’s greatest Cabernet in the Santa Cruz mountains, and spent decades from the 1930’s to the 1970’s pursuing that task. Blackstone winery owner, Courtney Benham, discovered Ray’s legacy in 1990 and acquired rights to the name. After selling Blackstone in 2003, he hung the Martin Ray sign plate on Laguna Road at the Martini & Prati site, which has been in continuous operation since 1881. The winery now releases a quality midrange line, Angeline, from North Bay appellations, and revived its namesake’s focus on mountain Cabernet. And continuing the old tradition, folks can pick up a gallon of hearty Round Barn Red for \$13.

Due to a label change, some of Martin Ray’s Angeline wines, normally a good value, are even more so right now. The Angeline 2005 Mendocino County Dry Riesling (\$10) is a crisp quaff with mineral undertones, and aroma of green apples and blond raisins. Fresh and lively without acidic sting, the Angeline 2006 Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$14) appears green-tinged to the eye, if only because of the lemongrass and honeydew melon information delivered to the tongue. A Russian River vs. Santa Barbara Pinot Noir taste-off may be offered; and those who have not the aptitude for the gallon can pick-up a one-liter jug of 2003 “Red” California Table Wine (\$14.99), a robust and balanced blend of Tempranillo, Syrah and Cab that makes a splash with cherry fruit steeped in vanilla oak, finishing sweet and fine. The Martin Ray 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20) from the Napa Valley is easily bested by the 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve (\$60). Steeped in mint and eucalyptus, dusted with cocoa powder, with a complex palate of black currant and tobacco, it is a product of high on Sonoma Mountain. Martin Ray himself would not be surprised.

Martin Ray Winery, 2191 Laguna Road, Santa Rosa. Winter hours, Thursday –Monday, 11am-4pm. Summer hours, Apr-Oct., Open Daily, 11am-5pm, for four complimentary tastes.
707-823-2404.

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