

Ridge Vineyards Turns 50

Building a legacy with Paul Draper and company

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WHEN RIDGE VINEYARDS WAS bonded as a commercial winery in the rugged mountains above Cupertino, California in 1962, the expectations for growth were rather low. At the time, winemaker **David Bennion** and the other three engineers from the **Stanford Research Institute**, who purchased a segment of the original **Monte Bello Ridge** property in 1959, had a simple dream of making a world-class Cabernet Sauvignon with fruit grown in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Little would this eclectic group of scientists know that the brand was destined for greatness and would eventually attract a cult following that would spread around the entire globe.

Along with Bennion, the other future leader of this movement was **Paul Draper**, a philosophy student-turned-winemaker who was hired by Ridge Vineyards in 1969. Prior to coming to the winery, Draper had worked with **Fritz Maytag** in a project in Chile. Under his guidance, the Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon quickly developed a reputation of a California first growth.



American winemaking legend Paul Draper began his career at Ridge Vineyards in 1969.

In the decades that followed, the winery would take on many more ambitious projects. Along with **Ravenswood**, **Storybook**, **Robert Biale** and other future members of the **Zinfandel Advocates and Producers** (ZAP) organization, they helped preserve the integrity of the lost grapes of California: old vine Zinfandel and “mixed blacks.” They helped prove that Chardonnay can taste good when made with mountain fruit; and from the winemaking angle, they have consistently made one of the best arguments for the use of air-dried American oak barrels to craft world-class wines.

For these reasons alone, the 50-year anniversary of the American

icon brand in 2012 is a cause for a serious celebration. But for Draper and company, it's simply the beginning of a new 50-year cycle of working with Mother Nature from the ground up.

“To us, each year is special,” said Draper, who now bears the official monikers of CEO and senior winemaker of Ridge Vineyards. “I have plenty of favorite wines that we’ve made. But I’d be foolish if I said that we have already topped off on the greatest potential of the vineyards and the terroir we have at our disposal.”



History of Ridge Vineyards 101

The crown jewel of the brand is the Monte Bello Estate Vineyard. Nestled at the top of the Santa Cruz Mountains at elevations ranging from 1,300 to 2,660 feet, the 150 acres of estate vineyards are planted on a rare combination of decomposing Franciscan green stone layered over fractured limestone and dry calcareous soils.

At just 15 miles from the Pacific Ocean, the cool-climate vineyard is right on the edge of Regions I and II, thus making the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation the coolest Cabernet Sauvignon-producing area in the state. The advantage of these warm days and cool nights is long hang time, complex fruit flavors, natural acidity and low pH.

The original grapes were planted on the property in 1886 by Dr. **Osea Perrone**, a San Francisco-based physician who developed the Montebello Winery at the top of the ridge. The first wine made with the fruit from the young vines followed in 1892.

When Perrone died in 1912, his nephew took over the operations and reopened the winery at Repeal. Eventually, the production of wine was moved to St. Helena, and the company was sold to the **L.N. Renault Co.** of New Jersey in 1943. Theologian **William Short** purchased what is now the “middle” vineyard on the property in 1949 and planted 25 acres of vineyards, primarily Cabernet Sauvignon, Ruby Cabernet and Chardonnay.

After Bennion and his group purchased the middle section of the property in 1959, the winery was bonded in 1962 in the building that had previously been the **Andro Mikulacao Winery** until 1942. A few years later the team purchased the old Perrone winery, caves and vineyards at the top of the ridge from **Leo and Evelyn Trentadue**, whose family had relocated to Geyserville in Sonoma County, where the soils were more fertile.

The first commercial release of Ridge Monte Bello was from the 1962 vintage. But by the end of the decade, the winery had earned a solid reputation for making 11 different quality wines that were elegant, flavorful and age-worthy.

Through the years, the Cabernet Sauvignon vines were planted at various stages. Planted next to the old **Torre Winery**, where the first Ridge wines were made from 1959 to 1969, the oldest vineyard block on the property is a 4-acre parcel of the Fountain Grove clone planted on St. George rootstock in 1949. Many of the other blocks feature the La Cuesta clone planted primarily on St. George, 110R and 1103P rootstocks in 1974, 1988, 1990, 2009 and 2010. The Mt. Eden clone, one of the newest FPS 40 heritage selections, has been planted on newer parcels as well.

To continue the growth of the brand, the winery made its first Zinfandel in 1964 with grapes from 80-year-old vines. Two years later, they purchased fruit from Alexander Valley to make the first vintage of Geyserville Zinfandel. The 1972 vintage marked the first vineyard-designate bottling of the Zinfandel-based wine made with vines planted in 1902 at Lytton Springs Vineyard in Dry Creek Valley. In the 1990s, the winery took over the leases for both of these special properties.



Ridge Vineyards vice president Eric Baugher oversees the wine-making program at the Monte Bello estate vineyard.

Besides the principal Ridge wines made with estate fruit, the winery also does separate bottlings from other prestigious sites, including vineyard-designate Zinfandels from the **Benito Dusi Ranch** in Paso Robles, **Pagani Ranch** in Sonoma Valley, **Ponzi Vineyard** in Russian River Valley and **York Creek Vineyard** in the Spring Mountain District of Napa Valley, as well as their limited release ATP Carignane made with old vine fruit from the **Buchignani Ranch** in the hills north of Dry Creek Valley.

In 1987, the original founders and a large group of later investors sold the winery to the owner of **Otsuka Pharmaceutical Co.** in Japan. Since then, the search for perfection has not slowed down for Draper and his

talented team, which includes winemakers **Eric Baugher** (Monte Bello) and **John Olney** (Lytton Springs) and vice president of vineyard operations **David Gates**.

This focus has led to a yearly process of respect for the health of the soil in each vineyard, picking the grapes at the right point during harvest and making flavorful wines with a true sense of place.

Minimal Intervention

In the cellar, the techniques used by Draper and the team were developed based on the works of the pre-Prohibition visionary winemaker **Emmett Rixford** of the Woodside-based **La Questa** winery and other top California producers in the late 19th century, as well as in the Bordeaux chateaux of that era.

In the Ridge Vineyards newsletter published in spring 2011, Draper wrote: “In 1933, after 13 years of Prohibition, there were only a handful of winemakers trained in pre-Prohibition traditional techniques who were young enough to come back to their old jobs. Those winemakers, at historic **Fountain Grove**, **Larkmead**, **Nervo**, **La Questa**, **Simi** and **Ingelnook**—to name a few, produced a number of truly great Cabernets and Zinfandels. In the

1970s, I was privileged to taste a broad range of those wines when they were 35 years and older. The majority were still showing beautifully, and I found several of them to be as complex as the great Bordeaux vintages from the late 1940s. These were pre-industrial wines.”

The result of this analysis led the winemaking team to use the most minimal amount of intervention. Instead of using cultured yeast strains, the grapes are fermented with native yeasts from the vineyard. To extract layers of favors, balanced tannins and deep color, they use small open-top fermenters and don’t use commercial enzymes. By tasting for tannin extraction during fermentation, they determine how long to continue pump-overs. And they don’t inoculate but let the malolactic fermentation occur naturally.

With sulfur, they use the most minimal amount possible—primarily only a small amount of SO₂ when the grapes are crushed, after malolactic fermentation and when doing rackings each quarter.

“It’s similar to alchemy,” said Baugher, who began working at Ridge in 1994. “The more contact in the fermenters, the more opaque the colors become, and the more the flavors express the personality of the site where the grapes were grown.”

At harvest, taste is the deciding factor behind when each block is picked. The decisions start once the clusters reach 22 brix. It’s not uncommon to have the premium wines finish at 14.1 to 14.2 degrees of alcohol. The goal is to avoid adding water at all costs.

At Monte Bello, the winery makes two separate wines that showcase the quality of the site. The first is the Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon, a famous blend selected by blind tasting barrel samples from each parcel. The

finished wine, which is typically comprised of 40 percent of the red wine grapes planted on the property, is elegant and enjoyable when young but also complex enough to be aged for a minimum of 10 years.

The second offering is the consistently delicious Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, a Bordeaux-style wine designed to be more approachable upon release yet still worthy of cellaring. While Cabernet is the dominant grape in the estate blend, smaller portions of Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot grapes grown on the property are often used in the blending process as well. The portion of each part of the blend is based on the vintage.

The first assemblage of both wines takes place in early February, following the vintage harvest. The second stage, which focuses on press wines and lots that were still unstable in February, is done in May. And in late November to early December the final blends are made.

According to Draper, the goal is to make wines that taste fresh instead of heavy, elegant instead of being based solely on power and age-worthy instead of a short-term quaffable fix that quickly becomes a lost memory. “A great wine is an investment that pays back over time,” Baugher said.

American Oak Barrels

To capture the necessary balance of fruit, tannins, firm acidity and the structure of the finished wine, all wines made by Ridge Vineyards are barrel-aged. But unlike the high percentage of premier California producers that prefer to mature their wines in French oak, Ridge Vineyards

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is a proud outlier that prefers working with cooperages that specialize in crafting barrels made with American oak. Needless to say, this program took time to develop.

Much of the change happened in the late 1990s when the quality of American-made barrels improved considerably. “In the early days the selections were not as good as they are today,” said Baugher. “The wide range of special forest selections was not as available, and fine-grain barrels with nice seasoned properties were very hard to find.”

The other improvement was the widespread availability of open air-dried barrels instead of artificially using kilns. Baugher says this hot trend made an enormous difference in the effect the forest can have on the wine. “Just as the grapes grown at Monte Bello have a unique flavor they pick up from the terroir, the same is true with fine barrels that are able to express the personality of the forests where the trees were grown.”

From that point on, the selection of barrels has been more fine-tuned. Each year the team experiments with special aging projects. In some cases, they work with barrels that have been air-dried and seasoned for as little as 18-months or as long as three to four years.

In addition to helping with the clarification of flavors, tannin resolution and adding layers of spice and sweetness to the finished wine, Baugher says the advantage to longer aging in American oak is that the tannins soften over time.

“The last thing we want is to have the wines mistaken for the styles made in Medoc or Bordeaux,” said Baugher. “Instead, we want to express a true



The wine barrel program at Ridge’s Lytton Estate in Healdsburg



sense of our site and highlight the specialty flavors that relate to the soils, climate and ultimate expression of the vineyard in any given vintage. The use of American oak can transcend all of these factors and allow us to show why the grapes are so special.”

The newest release of the Ridge 2008 Monte Bello Estate, a blend of 72 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 28 percent Merlot, was aged for 18 months in a combination of 98 percent new and 2 percent one-year-old, air-dried American oak barrels made by a myriad of top America-based cooperages—each of which has its advantages.

One of the premium producers is **Tonnellerie Radoux USA**, whose production facility is located just north of Santa Rosa, California, a short drive from the Ridge Lytton Springs Estate in Healdsburg. For the Monte Bello program, the winemaking team commonly uses Radoux Bordeaux barriques made with a selection from different forests.

Baughner likes the way the fine-grain oak integrates with the wine toward the end of the process. “In the early period, the wines in the barrels tend to be tight and refined. But at 18 months the tannins really start to smooth out to add sweet attributes to the mid-palate and subtle spicy nuances to the finish,” he said.

Another producer is **Canton Cooperage**, the American subsidiary of **Chene & Cie Group**, which operates cooperages and stave mills in the U.S. and France, including **Tonnellerie Taransaud** in Cognac. Based in Lebanon, Kentucky, many of the trees used by the cooperage are from the West Cumberland forest in Kentucky and the Hoosier forest in Indiana.

The wine barrel program at Ridge Vineyard’s Monte Bello Estate



GRAND
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VINTAGE
PREMIUM

Grand Cru

VINTAGE

When working with the Canton “Vintage” series, Baugher has been particularly impressed with consistent levels of richness, sweetness, toastiness and bright spicy notes the wines show on a consistent basis. “Barrel to barrel, the Canton products are spot on,” said Baugher.

On a more boutique scale, Ridge also uses custom barrels crafted by **Kelvin Cooperage**, the Louisville, Kentucky-based company owned and operated by the **McLaughlin** family. Through the years, the brand has earned a solid reputation for handcrafting barrels with fine-grained Appellation oak that helps lift the core fruit components in the wine, as well as variations of toast from medium to medium-plus that help add more layers of spice and seasoning to the finished blends.

The closest in character to French barrels are the Radoux and Canton selections made with white oak from Minnesota. “Based on the latitude of the forests and the density of the wood, the strengths of these barrels can be found in the fantastic aromatics, the hint of French graphite character, smooth texture and roundness on the palate,” said Baugher, who uses a small amount with the Monte Bello Cabernet program.

Of course, each year a few French oak barrels are experimented with for the Monte Bello program. But according to Baugher, the biggest downside to using the French barrels is the grainy effect it has on the tannins. “To us, the American barrels provide a nice lift to the flavors, add more viscosity to the body and texture, and balance nicely with the tannins on the finish.”

In contrast, the Zinfandel program only uses a minimal amount of new oak, typically an average of 15 to 20 percent new for each wine. These wines are primarily aged in either Canton or Kelvin barrels. According to Olney, the winemaker in charge of the Zinfandel program at the Lytton Springs facility, the trick to using barrels is based on showcasing the fruit.

“With Zinfandel, the sweetness of new barrels is not as necessary. When the grapes are picked, they already have those nice ripe, fruity flavors, so the goal is to find barrels that help soften the tannins and add extra touches of spice to the finished blend,” said Olney. “Really, our ultimate goal is to present the most natural flavors possible for each vintage.”

Chardonnay and American Oak

In addition to the finished red wines, American oak barrels are used for the Ridge Chardonnay program as well. At Monte Bello, the first few acres of Chardonnay were planted by **William Short** in 1942. Two decades later, the fruit from this block was used to make the inaugural release of the Ridge Chardonnay in 1962.

In the mid-1980s, newer blocks were planted to replace the low yields of the older vines. Today, the 10 separate parcels are used to make four different styles of Chardonnay designates: Monte Bello, Estate Chardonnay, Jim-somare and Mikulaco. In each case, the grapes are whole-cluster pressed and barrel-fermented.

Until the early 1990s, the Chardonnays were primarily aged in French oak. But that changed in 1996 when Draper and Baugher began testing the flavor profiles of the wines aged in both American and French oak. The dramatic change came in 2001 when the amount of American oak being used reached a 50 percent plateau. The winery has never looked back.

The current release of the 2008 Monte Bello Chardonnay is made with 90 percent air-dried American oak (10 percent new, 66 percent one and two years, 24 percent three-years-old) and 10 percent French oak barrels. The other three new releases average 85 percent American oak as well. For this program, most of the barrels are designed by Kelvin and used for an average of five years before being discarded.

“There is no doubt that we are extremely sensitive about oak,” said Draper.

Historic Vineyard Society

In addition to working with a myriad of old vines and field selections at Ridge Vineyards, vineyard operations vice president David Gates (pictured) is a board member of the **Historic Vineyard Society** (HVS), a non-profit, 501 C-3 organization dedicated to the preservation of California’s historic vineyards.

Founded in 2010, HVS’s mission is focused on educating savvy wine consumers on the special nature of old vines and broadening the view of this precious and depleting state, national and global resource.

To become a member of this elite society, a vineyard must have been planted in California no later than 1960, and at least one-third of the vines currently producing must be directly traced back to their original planting date.

“Saving the heritage of these classic vineyards is a noble cause which we hope will be passed onto many future generations of California residents and fans of wine around the globe,” said

Gates, who serves on the committee with fellow board members **Jancis Robinson**, author and wine critic; **Mike Officer**, **Carlisle Vineyards**; **Tegan Passalacqua**, **Turley Wine Cellars**; **Morgan Twain-Peterson**, **Bedrock Vineyards** and **Mike Dildine**. For more information about the organization, visit www.historicvineyardsociety.org.



Vineyard manager David Gates discusses the unique layers of decomposed limestone and calcareous soils at the Monte Bello vineyard.

Organic Farming Practices

Other improvements at Ridge are taking place in the vineyards. Gates, who was hired by the winery in 1989, has done his part to produce flavorful wines of distinction and longevity by keeping the vines in balance.

Beyond picking the right combination of rootstock and clones or special selections that pair perfectly with the climate, vine vigor to soil type and crop size to canopy, other innovative cultural viticultural practices being used run the gamut, from pruning to shoot thinning, leaf pulling, crop thinning and irrigation management.

In each case, Gates says the goal is to show respect for each individual block. “The key is to not ask the vines to do too much or too little,” he said. As a result of this focus, two of the sections at Monte Bello and three sections at the Lytton Estate properties were certified organic earlier this year.

At Monte Bello, the vineyard is alive all year long. To add nitrogen and organic matter to the vines, the team uses many different cover crops, including a selection of soil-building legumes intermixed with annual fescues, wild oats and other native grasses commonly found in the Santa Cruz Mountains. There are also a variety of different insectaries to attract beneficial insects, grasses and clovers to help with erosion control and other deep-rooted perennial grasses to control vigor in excessively fertile soils.

Of course, hillside farming isn’t easy. To remove weeds from the base of each vine, Gates and his team use a **Biano**, an innovative machine that can cut close to the base of each vine. And because of the steepness of the slopes, the individual blocks are typically mowed, not tilled. “On this property, a 20 percent slope is considered level,” said Gates, with a chuckle and a short sigh.



Old Petite Sirah vines planted at Ridge's Lytton Estate

To stay true to organic farming principles, integrated pest management techniques and composted grape pomace are used in place of pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilizers. Each parcel of the property is equipped with plenty of raptor roosts and bird boxes spread throughout the vineyard that attract western bluebirds, barn owls, American kestrels, merlins and red-tailed hawks to help keep the rodent population at a minimum.

New Sonoma County Programs

Similar farming practices have been applied at Ridge's Sonoma County properties as well. In addition to working with a classic field blend of old Zinfandel vines and mixed blacks at the Geyserville Estate, exciting new plantings of Syrah, Mataro (Mourvedre), Grenache, Petite Sirah, Carignane and a wide range of heritage clones of Zinfandel are at various stages at the East Bench and Lytton West sections of the Lytton Springs Estate.

Other highlights at Lytton Springs include: a series of experimental pre-Prohibition field blends planted in cooperation with the **UC Davis** Extension program in 2000-2001, a 4.82-acre parcel of Primitivo planted on St. George rootstock in 2004 and newer trial blocks featuring interplantings of Zinfandel, Carignane and Petite Sirah with cuttings taken from old vines.

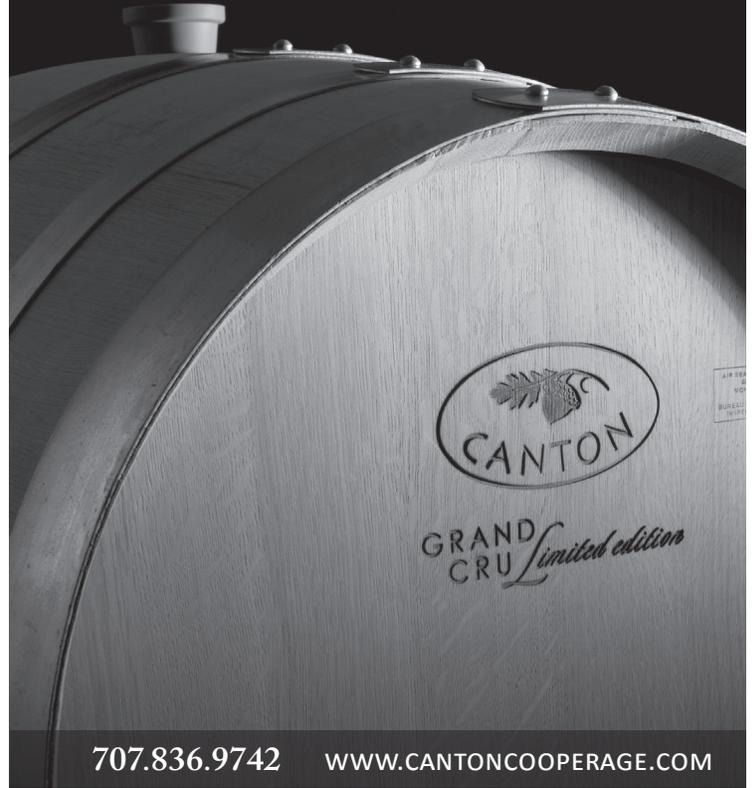
In addition to importing cuttings of the historic Croatian ancestor of Zinfandel called Crljenak Kastelanski, in 2013 the winery also plans on planting a new block of Pribidrag, an extremely rare Zinfandel clone discovered by Draper and a group of associates while visiting the Croatian town of Omis on the Dalmatian coast in 2002. Currently, plant materials from both of these unique Croatian clones are being propagated and cleaned up of all viruses by the **UC Davis Foundation Plant Services** (FPS).

In an article published in the FPS newsletter in November 2007, Gates stated, "The genetic variability in these selections from Croatia will hopefully add a bit more complexity and diversity to California Zinfandel. It will be fun to see in the coming years just how that genetic variability will express itself—viticulurally and in the wines made from these grapes."

When asked about working with this wide range of grape varieties and special selections, Gates admitted that it's much easier to work with older vines than newer ones. "The older vines are not as fussy. In most cases, they are maturing by tapping into new sub-soils, and they're used to getting a little torture from Mother Nature on a regular basis. With the new ones, you have to treat them like babies by making sure the soils are healthy and mastering pruning techniques that keep them in check until they become more mature." **WBM**

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