

RIDGE VINEYARDS

HISTORY

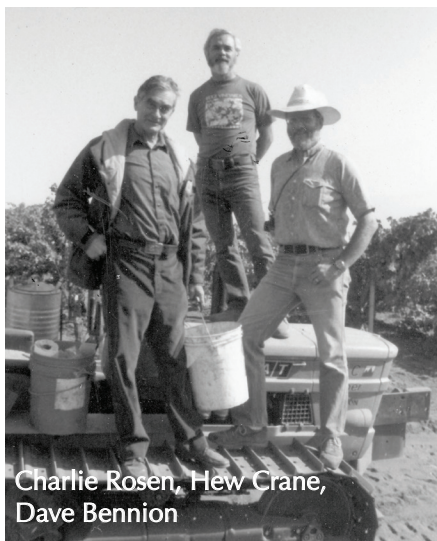
The history of Ridge Vineyards begins in 1885, when Osea Perrone, a doctor who became a prominent member of San Francisco's Italian community, bought 180 acres near the top of Monte Bello Ridge. He terraced the slopes and planted vineyards; using native limestone, he constructed the Monte Bello Winery, producing the first vintage under that name in 1892. This unique cellar, built into the mountainside on three levels, is Ridge's production facility. At 2600', it is surrounded by the "upper vineyard."

In the 1940s, William Short, a theologian, bought the abandoned winery and vineyard just below the Perrone property; he replanted several parcels to cabernet sauvignon in the late 1940s. From these vines — now the "middle vineyard"— new owners Dave Bennion and his three partners, all Stanford Research Institute engineers, made a quarter-barrel of "estate" cabernet. That Monte Bello Cabernet was among California's finest wines of the era. Its quality and distinctive character, and the wines produced from these same vines in 1960 and '61, convinced the partners to re-bond the winery in time for the 1962 vintage.

The first zinfandel was made in 1964, from a small nineteenth-century vineyard farther down the ridge. This was followed in 1966 by the first Geyserville zinfandel. The founding families reclaimed the Monte Bello terraces, increasing vineyard size from fifteen to forty-five acres. Working on weekends, they made wines of regional character and unprecedented intensity. By 1968, production had increased to just under three thousand cases per year, and in 1969, Paul Draper joined the partnership. A Stanford graduate in philosophy—recently returned from setting up a winery in Chile's coast range—he was a practical winemaker,



Osea Perrone



Charlie Rosen, Hew Crane,
Dave Bennion

not an enologist. His knowledge of fine wines and traditional methods complemented the straightforward "hands off" approach pioneered at Ridge. Under his guidance the old Perrone winery (acquired the previous year) was restored, the finest vineyard lands leased or purchased, the consistent quality and international reputation of the wines established. Cabernet and Zinfandel account for most of the production; Syrah, Grenache, Carignane, and Petite Sirah constitute a small percentage. Known primarily for its red wines, Ridge has also made limited amounts of chardonnay since 1962.

Lytton Springs, in Sonoma County, became part of the Ridge estate in 1991. A quarter century's experience with this vineyard had convinced us that it was an exceptional piece of ground. Forty consecutive vintages of Geyserville attest to yet another stunning combination of location and varieties. Though born in the early sixties to the post-Prohibition world of modern California winemaking, Ridge relies on nature and tradition rather than technology. Our approach is straightforward: find intense, flavorful grapes; intrude upon the process only when necessary; draw the fruit's distinctive character and richness into the wine.



Lytton Springs Winery



Monte Bello Winery

ORGANIC AND SUSTAINABLE FARMING

At Ridge, we are committed to sustainability, and to organic certification of our vineyards. Sustainable agriculture can be summarized as a farming system that is sensitive to the environment, responsible to the community, and economically feasible to implement and maintain. These three principles provide a framework and direction to guide all decisions relating to the farm. Sustainability is an ever-changing target, even a state of mind: improvements can always be made to lessen one's impact on the planet. Organic farming can be defined as sustainable farming using only certified organic chemicals and amendments. 184 acres of vineyard at Monte Bello, Lytton Springs, Geyserville, and East Bench are certified organic.

Additional sustainable farming practices include:

COMPOST

Each year, we compost all our grape stems and pomace (fermented skins and seeds) along with our neighbors' horse manure and other amendments. Composted for a year, this "brown gold" is spread on our vineyards after harvest and helps feed our soil, which then feeds our vines.

COVER CROPS

We use several different cover crops, depending on our goals for each vineyard block. These include soil-building legume and grass mixes that add just enough nitrogen and organic matter to keep the vines healthy; insectary plantings to increase beneficial insects; grasses and clovers for erosion control; deep-rooted perennial grasses to control vigor in excessively fertile soils.

INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT

We use IPM for all our insect and disease management. IPM is a systems approach to pests and diseases that combines a wide array of farming practices with careful monitoring of pests and their natural enemies to prevent crop damage. An important overall goal of IPM is to reduce or eliminate pesticide use of both organic and synthetic chemicals



INSECTS

Instead of spraying to control vine-damaging spider mites, we use beneficial insects to reduce their populations to non-significant levels. Careful monitoring of the mites—along with inundative releases of the pest's natural enemies—means we don't have to spray.

BIRDS

We use raptor roosts and bird boxes to help with insect and rodent control. Plus, they are important to a healthy environment.

VINE BALANCE

We constantly work toward achieving vine balance, essential to producing flavorful wines of distinction and longevity. The cultural practices used in viticulture, from pruning to shoot thinning, leaf pulling, crop thinning, and irrigation management, all lead toward

growing grapevines that match variety to climate, vine vigor to soil type, and crop size to canopy. This harmony within the grapevine is a microcosm of the vineyard ecosystem. The more in-balance our vines, the more sustainable we become.

EDUCATION

Our commitment to sustainable farming leads to our involvement in several organizations that foster new ideas about agriculture and environmental stewardship. We are participating in an agroecology diversity project with UC Berkeley, which will evaluate use of cover crops and hedgerows within a vineyard to promote beneficial insects. The non-profit Vineyard Team, working toward sustainability in winegrapes, is collaborating with us on a cover crop trial of various clovers and their effectiveness in attracting beneficials.

Ridge has been recognized by the United States House of Representatives and the California State Legislature for excellence in water quality improvement and environmental stewardship.

PRE-INDUSTRIAL WINEMAKING AT RIDGE

There is a lot of talk in the wine world these days about "natural" winemaking, a term which seems to mean different things to different people. Is it organic and/or biodynamic grape growing? The refusal to use additives and processing? Minimal intervention in the winemaking process? It is such a confusing and, to some, a negative term, that we prefer something more accurate to describe what we do at Ridge.

INDUSTRIAL WINE Jancis Robinson, one of the UK's foremost wine critics, has said that over 90% of the wine produced in the world today is "industrial." Taking off from that statement, our winemaking at Ridge for the last fifty years can best be described as "pre-industrial." In 1933, after thirteen years of Prohibition, there was 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 Cuesta, Simi, and Inglenook—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 thirty-five years old and older. The majority were still showing beautifully, and I found several of them to be as complex as the great Bordeaux vintages of the late 1940s. These were pre-industrial wines.

With the end of Prohibition, the University of California at Davis stepped in to fill the need for winemaker expertise in this country, and began, year by year, to reinvent winemaking as an industrial process. In 2010, in Issue 30 of *The World of Fine Wines*, one of today's top wine publications, Master of Wine Benjamin Lewin describes how all too many California cabernets are made today:

"The move to harvesting grapes with brutally high sugar levels has led to some ingenious ways of adjusting alcohol levels...When you have a must that is simply too high in Brix, you add some water to bring the sugar level down to a level that will ferment, then you bleed off some juice as fermentation begins to mitigate the effects of dilution. Some winemakers add acid to musts of high Brix before adjusting concentration; this is called the acid whip."

The style of red wine this approach produces—generally referred to as the "international" style—can involve use of reverse osmosis; the addition of Ultra Purple, a 2000 to 1 concentrate; and chemically sterilizing the wine with Velcorin (Di-methyl dicarbonate.) Many of these are in use around the world. Some in Bordeaux use micro-oxigenation, reverse osmosis or room-temperature evaporation, among other techniques. California should not be singled out. Industrial wines can be heavy, rather than fresh. When tasting 2007 cabernets recently, Eric Asimov of the *New York Times* noted:

"...we were disappointed to find so many uniform, monochromatic wines with little finesse...Instead of complexity, the rule seems to be all fruit, all the time, with power deemed preferable to elegance."

PRE-INDUSTRIAL WINES

At Ridge, we felt from the beginning that these modern, increasingly industrial, wines lacked the complexity, the sense of place, and the ability to age and develop that the pre-industrial wines demonstrated. So we looked back to the 19th Century—to techniques used in the finest California wineries such as La Cuesta, and in the Bordeaux châteaux of that era. In a synthesis of past and present, we have taken the pre-industrial techniques and applied

them in conjunction with the best, least intrusive modern equipment. We've been told that we have the most sophisticated analytical laboratory of any winery our size. Given our minimal use of SO₂, we depend on lab analyses to alert us to any problem long before it could be perceived by tasting.

VINEYARDS We've employed these winemaking techniques at Ridge for fifty years, with the goal of making the best, most site-specific wines possible. The starting point is having great vineyards. We were blessed by having the 125-year-old Monte Bello vineyard, abandoned after Prohibition, and its now-sixty-year-old cabernet vines, replanted in the late 1940s. Searching for the best, most expressive sites, we made our first zinfandel in 1964 from eighty-year-old vines. In 1966 we made our first Geyserville—from vines that are now one hundred and thirty



years old—and have made it every year since. 1972 marked our first Lytton Springs, from vines planted in 1902. Over the following years, we found that those two, out of more than fifty old-vine zinfandel vineyards we have worked with, were producing the highest quality wines—most complex and consistent in their individual character. In 1990, we took over the Geyserville vineyard on a long-term lease with right of first refusal. In 1991 and 1995, we acquired the eastern, and then the western, portion of the vineyard lands first planted by "Captain" Litton in the 1870s. They, with Monte Bello, make up our three estate vineyards. Farming them sustainably, we attempt to carry the soil, the microclimate—everything affecting the site—into the wine, and to gain a true sense of place. Today, the three provide 75% of the fruit we use, and they will soon be organically certified. That means we use cover crops, integrated pest management techniques, mechanical weed removal, and composted grape pomace in place of pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilizers

Because taste is the overriding factor behind our harvesting decisions, we pick when the grapes are ripe, but not overripe. All our grapes (estate or purchased) are hand-picked, which allows for sorting in the vineyard.

WINEMAKING Our winemaking philosophy includes fermenting entirely with native yeasts from the vineyard, rather than cultured yeast strains; extracting color, flavor, and tannins from the grapes without use of commercial enzymes; determining—by tasting for tannin extraction during fermentation—how long to continue pump-overs; allowing malolactic fermentation to occur naturally, without inoculation; achieving wine clarity through settling and racking; making major winemaking decisions, including blending, based on tasting rather than a pre-determined recipe.

Through years of experience, we have found that minimal additions of sulfur are essential to avoiding the ever-present risk of wine oxidation or spoilage, which destroys the individual vineyard character of the wine. We add a small amount of SO₂ when the grapes are crushed, after malolactic fermentation, and very small amounts at quarterly rackings, rigorously maintaining the minimum effective level for each wine.

Occasionally, if we have a wine lot (or an entire, assembled wine) with excessive tannin, we may fine it gently, using fresh egg whites. The egg whites precipitate to the bottom of the tank or barrel, improving balance by removing a portion of the tannin, and by further integrating the wine. When the whites have formed a firm layer, we slowly rack the clean wine off this sediment. Pad filtration then removes any remaining trace of egg white. We avoid membrane sterile filtration, a process which—to a minor but noticeable degree—affects flavor and complexity.

Tasting the zinfandels throughout their time in the cellar allows us to select those lots that best express each vineyard's character, and combine them as the vineyard-designated wine. Lots with less intense individuality are held out.

MONTE BELLO AND ESTATE CABERNET SAUVIGNON

For the Bordeaux varietals, which are all grown on the Monte Bello vineyard, the approach is somewhat different. After years of experience, we have found that the parcels can be divided roughly in half based on the style of wine each has produced in past years. One group is more approachable, and develops its full complexity earlier; from these, we select the Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (formerly the Santa Cruz Mountains). The other, though balanced and enjoyable as a young wine, begins to develop its full depth, complexity, and superb quality with a minimum of ten years' aging. The Monte Bello is selected by blind tasting from these parcels. The first assemblage for both takes place in early February, following vintage. A second, that considers press wine and lots that were not yet stable in February, takes place in May. Thus, from one vineyard, we make two wines—distinct in style, but sharing the vineyard's individuality.

In summary, Ridge bases grape-growing in each vineyard on long experience with the site, while simultaneously making use of the most recent advances in vineyard management. Pre-industrial winemaking begins with respect for the natural process that transforms fresh grapes into wine, and the 19th-Century model of minimum intervention. When you have great vineyards that produce high quality grapes of distinctive individual character, this is not only an environmentally and socially responsible approach, it's also the best way to consistently make fine wine.

Paul Draper 3/2011
Monte Bello Ridge

