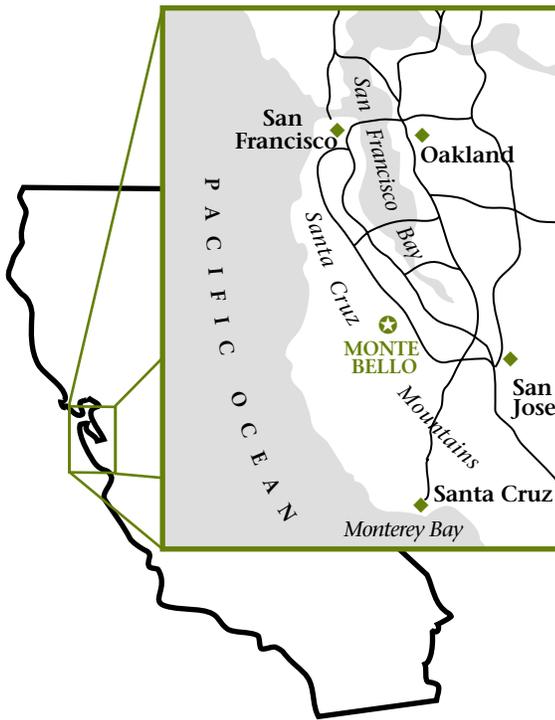


Vineyard Production:
89 tons from 92 acres
Selection: 40%

96 Monte Bello Vineyard, bottled May 98

An extremely short crop in 1996 was largely attributable to a disruptive storm in mid-May and the two weeks of blustery weather that followed. The Monte Bello vineyard was severely affected. At the upper (2500'-2600') and middle (2100'-2300') elevations, yields were down by forty percent; at the lower (1400'-2000') by a full sixty percent. We determine when to harvest by tasting the grapes. Record-high daytime temperatures could have caused flavors to become overripe, but cool nights maintained firm acidity and well-defined fruit. The first assemblage of Monte Bello—in February following vintage—typically includes eighty-five to ninety-five percent of the parcels that will make up the final wine. This year we made two versions, keeping them separate until August to be sure each was fully stable. Once combined, the whole proved greater than its parts. Sensuous and complex, with layered fruit and beautifully integrated tannins, this is among the loveliest of the '90s. Accessible as a young wine, it will develop further with twelve to fifteen years of bottle age. PD (4/98)



Location: Monte Bello Ridge, Santa Cruz Mountains, Santa Clara County.
Acreage: Cabernet Sauvignon - 48.5 acres
Merlot - 6.0 acres
Petit Verdot - 3.0 acres
Yield: 1 - 2 tons/acre
Soils: Decomposing Franciscan rock mixed with clay, laid over fractured limestone.
Climate: Cool, mountainous—between the Mediterranean and Maritime Zones.
Elevation: 2300' - 2600'
Exposure: Principally south/southeast

RIDGE 1996

CALIFORNIA

MONTE BELLO®

80% CABERNET SAUVIGNON, 11% MERLOT, 9% PETIT VERDOT
MONTE BELLO RIDGE ALCOHOL 13.2% BY VOLUME
PRODUCED AND BOTTLED BY RIDGE VINEYARDS, INC. BW 4488
17100 MONTE BELLO ROAD, P.O. BOX 1810, CUPERTINO, CA 95015

The harvest of 1996 supports the idea that low yields result in high-quality wines. The year began with two huge storms, one in mid-January and the other in March, each unleashing over ten inches of rain in a few short days. Rainfall for the year exceeded sixty-four inches, and storm-driven winds in excess of ninety-five miles per hour gusted across Monte Bello Ridge. Such conditions pose no problem when vines are dormant; after bud break and during bloom, they can be devastating. March and April provided warm, beautiful weather for vine development, but an unusual May thunderstorm—bringing with it high winds and cold ocean air—struck just as the vines bloomed. On Monte Bello's upper and middle vineyards, cabernet sauvignon and merlot yields were reduced by thirty percent; the lower vineyards lost more than forty percent.

The storms of winter and early spring were followed by an exceptionally warm summer. On June 3 the thermometer reached 100°—rare for our cool region—and the weather remained warm through harvest, with thirty days over 90°. The heat, plus the short crop, accelerated ripening, resulting in a Monte Bello harvest that began two weeks earlier than usual.

Each of the thirty-three parcels was fermented separately, using small stainless steel tanks. Natural yeast fermentations began within forty-eight hours. With the Bordeaux varietals, we drain the fermenting juice into a tub and pump it gently over the floating cap of grapes, extracting color from the skins and tannin from the seeds. In past years we have attempted to cycle all the liquid in a fermentor over the skins twice a day, but our calculations have always been intuitive. This year, to time the pump-overs more accurately, we carefully calculated the amount of juice in each tank and the speed of each pump. It took far longer to turn a tank than we had previously thought. With two full turns a day, deep color and significant tannins were extracted in an average of nine days, rather than the typical twelve to eighteen. We press to taste, not to a recipe; these shorter, more extractive macerations were a clear advance in the 1996 vintage.

The natural malolactics finished in late November, and we began tasting each separate wine to select the finest and most characteristic for the Monte Bello. Uncertain of stability, we made two first blends instead of the usual one. After a summer in barrel, the two, combined, proved not only stable, but superior in structure and character to either component. Atypically, the full assemblage was not made until August, more than ten months after vintage.

Aged almost entirely in new, air-dried american oak, the 1996 stands out—even in the remarkable decade of the nineties—as beautifully structured, complex, and balanced. This is sensuous wine, with great depth and length—one of the finest Monte Bellos of the last twenty years.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Saper".

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