

Set in his ways—wonderfully

Paul Draper's distinctive Ridge wines helped put California on the map. 'Guidance and care,' he says, are all he adds.

Cupertino, Calif. — RIDGE VINEYARDS, you might not be surprised to learn, is set on a ridge. On a recent overcast day, its chief executive and winemaker Paul Draper leaned his tall frame against a railing at the western edge of the winery's harvest bay, 2,600 feet above sea level in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and peered down to Stevens Canyon, a forested abyss 2,000 feet below.

"Right here, where we're standing," Draper explained, "is the edge of the North American plate," the original west coast of the continent. At the bottom of the canyon lies the San Andreas fault, the lead edge of the Pacific plate, which has spent the last few millions of years grinding into the North American continent, aggravating the landscape sufficiently to cause the formation of the Coast Range, and leaving a rare deposit of limestone at Monte Bello Ranch, Ridge Vineyards' core property.

The between-ness of the place makes it fitting for Draper, who has his feet planted in two worlds: He's a winemaker who makes thrillingly modern wines from ancient vineyards, and he does so by adhering to an Old World winemaking tradition.

Here in the hills above Palo Alto, a place that few would include on the list of great California wine regions, Draper has made Zinfandels against which all other American Zins are measured, and has crafted what is arguably the country's most compelling and celebrated Bordeaux blend, Ridge Monte Bello.

If this sounds hyperbolic, consider last summer's Judgment of Paris Tasting, held simultaneously in London and Napa. The Monte Bello from 1971 ran away with the competition among older Bordeaux and California Cabernets; and in a follow-up competition, the 2000 Monte Bello took top honors among the younger red wines. The performance suggests that Ridge wines have remained more constant and enduring than any other American wine produced today.

Decades before Ridge was founded, Monte Bello Ranch was planted to grapevines. In 1885 a prosperous San Francisco doctor named Osea Perrone planted Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, and built a winery from limestone quarried on the mountain (a quarry operates to this day at the base of Monte Bello ridge). The vineyards languished during Prohibition, but were revived in the 1940s and were replanted to Cabernet at the end of that decade. On the strength of bottlings from that older vineyard, a small group of wine-loving Stanford University research scientists decided to buy the property in 1962, calling the winery Ridge but retaining the historical name of the property, Monte Bello. Seven years later, Draper was hired as winemaker.

Monte Bello Ranch consists of noncontiguous vineyards at an elevation of 2,100 to 2,800 feet, less than 15 miles from the Pacific Ocean. It is cool, to say the least, especially when it comes to ripening Cabernet Sauvignon, which makes up the bulk of the Monte Bello blend. That coolness ensures long and even ripening, a late harvest (completion in late October is common) and, for California, moderate to low alcohols. In addition, the limestone-inflected soils give the wine a unique structure, marked by gripping minerality that feels rare in California.

The owners intended for Ridge to specialize in Cabernet. But in the early '60s, there were few Cabernet vineyards in California, so the partners made wine with what was available, namely Zinfandel and a variety of its cohorts, such as Petite Syrah and Carignane, to supplement production while replanting Cabernet at Monte Bello.

Old Zin vineyards

Before Draper was hired, they began leasing Zinfandel vineyards that Ridge still uses today, including Geyserville and Lytton Springs. Draper came on board having learned about wine through tasting older Bordeaux. He knew little about Zinfandel, which occupied most of the barrels at the time, but quickly became a convert.

"When I joined them in '69," says Draper, "there was some Zinfandel in barrel from '68, and I tasted it and thought, 'My God, this may not be Cabernet Sauvignon, but it's pretty interesting stuff.' The vines were all 80 years old by then." They are now well over 120 years old.

Thus began a long relationship with old vineyards, the ones that survived Prohibition — the ones, as Draper says,



"that must have had something going for them" to avoid being ripped out. Draper has made wines from more than 100 such vineyards, whose names read like a roll of 19th century immigrant homesteaders: Nervo, Buchignani, Trentadue, Ponzo and Evangelo. Ridge's commitment to old vine fruit not only saved many of these vineyards from a premature death, but revived an interest in old vineyards across the state, inspiring other Zinfandel and field blend protégés such as Ravenswood, Rosenblum and Cline.

Working with old vines has done much to shape Draper's winemaking philosophy: "We're involved in a craft that has its roots in nature," he says. "It's a natural process. We're not winemakers — a grower is more what it's about; guiding the vine and the process, and creating it [the wine]. Nothing is added to the ingredients; only guidance and care."

Draper is tall and thin, with graceful hands and a deep, resonant voice. His manner is ever thoughtful; nothing he says seems unconsidered, in keeping with his studies at Stanford, where he majored in philosophy. Indeed, his words seem to come from some deep reservoir in his experience.

Draper was raised on a farm in Barrington, Ill., now an exurb of Chicago. His parents sent him to prep school at Choate, and he still remembers weekends in New York with his roommate's family, in part because "they had wine with lunch and with dinner." By that time, Draper says, "I was reading novels by Hemingway and Huxley; wine seemed like part of the fabric of life."

When it came time to choose a college, he applied to Stanford, because he knew it grew wine grapes in California.

Early in his career, Draper knew exactly what his influences were, and what conclusions to draw from them: "I decided that the finest wines I'd ever tasted were old Bordeaux, made by traditional methods, not by modern technology," he says.

"This was completely empirical; drawn entirely from tasting. So in a sense, when everybody in California was going forward into the future, we went backward and said natural yeast, natural malolactic, no additives, no manipulation, but real attention."

He has drawn similar conclusions with older California wines. At one tasting in the mid-'70s, he assembled half a dozen post-Prohibition Zinfandel bottlings from the late '30s and '40s, by wineries including Simi, Larkmead, Fountain Grove, and the then-new winemaker on the block, freshly minted UC Davis grad Louis Martini.

"The Simi and the Fountain Grove were still marvelous wines," Draper says, "and at the bottom of each bottle was a big deposit of sediment. But you poured out the Martini and the bottle was clean; the wine was completely stripped. And so I looked into it and, sure enough, Martini had sterile-filtered the wine. Already by the '50s, the Davis style — squeaky-clean wines — was the norm."

"That's when I thought maybe we should go back in time, not forward."

It helps that Draper has possibly the most prodigious palate memory of any winemaker I've met. Without effort he can rattle off the qualities of a Château Margaux from 1900 that he tasted in the '70s, pointing out the differences between it and its counterpart from, say, 1950.

In wines he considers truly profound, he has scrupulously analyzed the winemaking, and in some cases adopted the practices to make them. In effect, he has provided a modern setting for traditional methods.

Those methods are ostensibly Old World, and they're meant to steward terroir expression. Draper has studied that expression in a hundred vineyards — but none has taught him more than Monte Bello Ranch. Ridge applies the estate name to two wines, a Cabernet-based blend and a Chardonnay; a third, the Santa Cruz Estate Red, also takes most or all of its fruit from that vineyard.

The Monte Bello blend, in part because of its marginal, vintage-sensitive source, requires careful attention when it comes to terroir expression. Vineyard elevations vary dramatically, leading to a great variety of flavor nuances. How these pieces fit together, and how to guide them into fitting is what Draper has come to master in his nearly 40 years of winemaking.

"Last year," he says, "when the wines were nearly finished fermenting, we saw some significant tannins showing up. We saw we had to slow down our pump-overs."

Like an elaborate tea-steeping process, pump-overs disperse wine through a thick "cap" of seeds and skins that typically gathers like a floating island at the top of a tank.

Every time the wine flows through the cap, tannin and extract is leached out and the wine's structure and balance changes. This is the most critical time to calibrate how the wine will feel and taste in the mouth.

In this instance, Draper needed to find a way to avoid a wallop of tannin without leaving the mouth-feel with a "hole."

"Because of those tannins," he says, "we started to return the liquid under the cap to avoid extracting more seed tannin. But as we continued to taste, we saw that avoiding the skins was going to leave the middle wanting. So those final pump-overs were once again distributed through the cap, over the skins. We tasted the wine constantly, and it was like magic. After 15, 20 minutes, the middle started to fill out, and there it was — there was Monte Bello."

Monte Bello represents the very best that these vineyards can achieve in a given year (the lots that don't make the cut are bottled in an estimable deuxième vin or "second wine," the term used to characterize the second wine of a given Bordeaux house) called Santa Cruz Estate.

The 2004 Monte Bello is a blend of about 75% Cabernet, with the balance of Merlot, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. It's as complete a wine from this vineyard as I've tasted in recent vintages, with a dark cloak of cassis fruit and black spices, supported by a dense minerality and a racy line of acidity.

Even experts, Draper says, commonly confuse this wine with a Bordeaux. That, he thinks, means he's gotten it about right.