
RIDGE

VINEYARDS

2011 MONTE BELLO HARVEST REPORT



Given the difficulty of 2010's growing season, it seemed unlikely that the vineyard would encounter such conditions again for a long, long time. In 2011, however, the vines came out of dormancy late, struggling to grow through drenching winter rains and a cold, wet spring. The season was off to a late start, closely paralleling 2010. Rain continued into late June, finally ceding to summer. Monte Bello's cool weather delayed flowering, so most parcels set a decent-size crop during the first good weather. Cabernet sauvignon set a large crop—final yields were fourteen percent above average. Petit verdot

and cabernet franc set average-size crops, but merlot's yield was off by more than twenty percent. Though summer was cold across most of Northern California, Monte Bello—considered a cool grape-growing area—actually enjoyed more sunshine and warmth than other northern regions. Heavy morning fogs that beset Napa and Sonoma during July and August rarely reached the vines high on Monte Bello Ridge. The growing season progressed nicely through summer; veraison was off by only ten days, not a full month, as we had feared. Petit verdot was the last variety to finish turning color, which it finally did at the end of Labor Day weekend.

Zinfandel—under the fog in Sonoma— was unusually late to ripen, causing concern that its harvest might overlap with Monte Bello's, and, if so, whether tank capacity would be sufficient to carry out all fermentations simultaneously. And, on the horizon, sat a significant early-winter storm—with the potential to devastate our zinfandel crop. We intervened, picking hand-over-fist for an entire week. Monte Bello's vineyard crew joined the Sonoma team to bring in all but a few parcels of the zinfandel. The storm hit on the night of October 3. Heavy rain and strong wind ripped through the north coast, but, miraculously, Monte Bello remained mild. Drying wind and warm, sunny weather returned, giving us three solid weeks of ideal ripening conditions. Harvest began slowly, as we waited for sugars to rise, but by October 25 another rainy cold front loomed. An urgent call brought our Sonoma crew to Monte Bello on October 31, and when the storm began on November 3, over ninety percent of the vineyard was safely in. Never before has so much Monte Bello fruit been picked over so short a time. This presented a receiving and berry-sorting challenge, but somehow, with crews and equipment working late into each night, it got done. In the winery, we quickly filled all small-capacity tanks; by November 4, thirty-five lots were fermenting. Natural yeasts were vigorous and healthy, there were no signs of stress or sluggishness, and everything went dry in a matter of ten days. Malolactics were also quick to start, and, rare for us, about fifteen percent of the lots had already finished at the time of pressing. This allowed all the lots to be barreled down on schedule; the remaining malolactics finished in barrel.

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Enough time has now passed for some settling to occur, and we are tasting the lots regularly to track quality. Albeit unofficial until sit-down assemblage tastings in February, as things stand now, cabernet sauvignon stands out as exceptional, and will be a significant percentage of the blend. Although merlot yields were low, it was a hard year for ripening. Our best guess is that we will include a small amount from the oldest, most water-stressed parcels. The petit verdot shows excellent aromatics, but may not be rich enough to include in the Monte Bello. Cabernet franc also had difficulty ripening; it did, however, produce beautiful results—the wine is opaque and structured. Alcohol is likely to be in the 12.7 -12.9% range, something we have not had for a decade. Depending on the outcome of first-assemblage blind tastings, this Monte Bello vintage might have as much as 92% cabernet sauvignon. This hasn't happened since the mid-1980s. Based on the fine quality of the cabernet lots, with rigorous selection, the 2011 Monte Bello should rival any past wine from this great site. In a difficult cabernet vintage, it will be one of the few stand-outs.

Eric Baugher (7 December 2011)

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MONTE BELLO SECOND ASSEMBLAGE, VINTAGE 2011



On May 10th, the largest group to date, from Production to the Vineyard to Sales met to hold the second assemblage tasting of the 2011 Monte Bello. Barrel samples of the first assemblage, two cabernet sauvignon lots, one merlot, and the petit verdot were blind tasted. In this initial flight, the first assemblage and the two cabernet lots received top scores. The merlot and petit verdot had great quality of their own, but lacked the degree of structure and the depth of complexity needed for inclusion in the Monte Bello. We proceeded by trying in one glass the Le Vasseur cabernet added to the first assemblage and the first assemblage alone in the other. They were both tasted blind so no one knew what glass contained the 6.4% addition of Le Vasseur. Scores were collected; each taster gave their descriptions before the identity of the glasses was revealed. The group favorite by a wide margin included the Le Vasseur cabernet. It had slightly darker fruit, fuller body, a longer finish, and more classic Monte Bello character. The final lot of cabernet from the Klein Vineyard's 10-acre parcel, was a 12.4% addition and could have had a greater impact on the direction and style of the Monte Bello. We tasted the two glasses, both of which contained the Le Vasseur cabernet, while one glass had the addition of the 10-acre cabernet.

Both were excellent, but one glass received the great majority of the votes. They were stylistically different; one being quite classic Monte Bello, the other, with the addition, was opaque, monolithic and dense, just a bit too heavy for our palates. We agreed to hold the 10-acre out. Next came our favorite part of the assemblage; to take the final glass and compare it blind against a number of recent vintages, in this case the 2006 through a barrel sample of 2010. Although vintage to vintage variation showed some differences in structural elements and fruit character, the common thread of Monte Bello ran through them all. The final assemblage of 2011 promises to be as great as any of these superb vintages. It has the highest percentage of cabernet sauvignon since the early 1980's. The fine tannins are coated with ripe mountain fruit; there is an amazing freshness that will carry it well into the future.

—Eric Baugher (5/12)