

The Greatest Vintner in America

Paul Draper's consistently wonderful wine.

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Posted Tuesday, Nov. 21, 2006, at 11:17 AM ET



Illustration by Rob Donnelly

If you're looking to make a patriotic statement with your wine choice this Thanksgiving, here's a suggestion: Give thanks to Ridge Vineyard's Paul Draper by drinking one of his wines. Draper, 70, is arguably the greatest winemaker America has ever produced. Ridge's Monte Bello, produced in a vineyard high above Silicon Valley, has been the iconic American cabernet sauvignon for nearly four decades now and is widely considered the equal of Bordeaux's first growths. Draper almost single-handedly turned zinfandel, a nonentity of a grape not so long ago, into a serious, agreeable wine. He also makes some of the finest California chardonnays on the market. But it often seems that Draper is more appreciated in Europe than he is at home. This Thanksgiving, it's worth giving the deity his due.

Draper joined Ridge in 1969 and immediately began fashioning wines of extraordinary quality and longevity. The 1971 Monte Bello finished fifth among 10 top French and American wines in the original 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting, which saw

several unheralded California chardonnays and cabernets best some of France's most heralded wines in a blind tasting. This May, in a blind tasting of the same 10 wines held to mark the 30th anniversary of that showdown, that same 1971 Monte Bello came in first. Apart from a few vintages in which the weather didn't cooperate, the Monte Bello has been uniformly sublime. Ditto Ridge's flagship zinfandels, the Geyserville and Lytton Springs, which, unusually for zinfandels, have shown the ability to age, and age well. It is a remarkable record of achievement; in fact, it is hard to think of a winery anywhere in the world that has produced such consistently great wines over so long a period of time. With Draper, it's been almost all peaks, no troughs.

So, where, then, is the veneration? Draper and Ridge are certainly appreciated in the United States; the wines consistently win high praise from the likes of Robert Parker and Wine Spectator, and they command the devotion of many oenophiles. But familiarity seems to have bred a degree of complacency—a tendency to take Ridge for granted. The winery has been around for a long time, and its wines are relatively easy to find. By contrast, the cult cabernets, zinfandels, and chardonnays that have besotted a particularly affluent segment of the American wine market in the last decade or so—wines like Harlan Estate and Screaming Eagle—are fairly new and tend to be exceedingly rare (which, of course, is part of the appeal).

Location is perhaps also a factor: Although Ridge has production facilities in Sonoma County, the winery itself is set in the Santa Cruz mountains, far removed from the hype and glamour of Napa and (increasingly) Sonoma. Out of sight doesn't, in this instance, mean out of mind, but it perhaps explains why Draper doesn't get the attention he deserves. But that remote mountaintop location is also partly responsible for the quality of the Monte Bello cabernet and the chardonnay—the high-altitude vineyards produce wonderfully ripe fruit but also infuse the wines with a pronounced mineral component, a rare quality in most California cabernets and chardonnays but a hallmark of nearly all the great European wines.

Draper, a philosopher by training, has brought a very European sensibility to his work. He has always emphasized elegance over power (though his wines display both) and was the first American winemaker to truly embrace the notion of terroir. For all these reasons, he has become an iconic figure in Europe. A few years ago, Britain's Decanter Magazine named him its Man of the Year; last year, the influential German magazine Wein Gourmet gave him a lifetime achievement award. Michel Bettane, France's leading wine critic, has long heaped extravagant praise on Draper, as have many eminent French winemakers. We should be seeing the same outpouring of respect on this side of the Atlantic, and Thanksgiving would be a fine time to start. John Kapon, the president of Acker Merrall & Condit, the New York-based wine auction house and retailer, put it rather emphatically in an e-mail:

There is no question that Draper and Ridge, as well as others like Randy Dunn, Bo Barrett to name a couple, are underappreciated/overlooked in the context of American wine and its history. The cult wines have been getting all the hype and attention but many of them crack up after 5 or 7 years in the bottle... . Hype sometimes wins over substance, but the real winners will be those who let wines like Ridge stay in their cellar!

Exactly. And where, by the way, will Draper be spending his Thanksgiving? Actually, in France.

Ridge Vineyards Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay 2004, \$30

Inviting aromas of orange blossom, apple, honeysuckle, and vanilla. Full-bodied and mouth-coating, with ripe apple, pear, and citrus flavors and a mineral backbone. A wine bursting with fruit and extract, but all of it wrapped in a seamless, subtle package. An excellent chardonnay.

Ridge Vineyards Sonoma County Three Valleys 2004, \$20

A blend composed of 68 percent zinfandel. A nice burst of raspberries out of the glass, along with floral, mineral, and brambly scents. A touch of sweetness greets the palate, then quickly dissipates. A big mouthful of juicy, dusty fruit, along with good acidity and big, ripe tannins. A wine that gives a lot of pleasure for not a lot of money.

Ridge Vineyards Lytton Springs 2004, \$33

This blend is 79 percent zinfandel, along with some petite sirah and carignan. A deep shade of purple. A sensational nose redolent of raspberries, leather, pepper, and minerals, along with some thyme and toasty oak. Cool, wonderfully poised fruit in the mouth. A chewy, dusty texture, some big, ripe tannins, and a long finish round out a seriously good zinfandel.

Ridge Vineyards Geyserville 2003, \$33

Another zinfandel-based blend. A big whiff of raspberry coulis greets the nose, along with violet, tar, tobacco, and oak aromas. A full-bodied, gently spicy wine with a nice mineral core. But the fruit is a bit too baked and sweet for my taste. I usually prefer the Geyserville to the Lytton Springs; not this time.

Ridge Monte Bello 2003, \$120

A youthful shade of purple. A terrific, subtle nose, with notes of cassis, coffee, black pepper, a bit of herb and savory. A full-bodied, gently oaky wine whose power is masked by incredible finesse and elegance. It opens up beautifully in the glass and lasts just about forever on the palate. A great wine.

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