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Decanter

Man of
the year
PAUL DRAPER



PLUS
Chicago
1983 Crus Classés
Top California Cabernet



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Paul Draper is only the third Californian to receive the **Decanter Man of the Year** accolade, following in the footsteps of legends such as Robert Mondavi and Andre Tchelistcheff. JOHN STIMPFIG looks back at Paul's 30-year career at Ridge Vineyards

the natural approach

Paul Draper is not a difficult person to pigeon hole. You just need extremely large parameters and lots of boxes. Do it that way and it's easy to pin down Ridge's guru-like winemaker as a cerebral sensualist, practical philosopher, Europhile Californian, romantic realist, intuitive empiricist, innovating traditionalist and dreaming doer. I could go on with yet more apparent contradictions which make up this complex, brilliant and likable man. But you probably get the gist.

However, Paul would already be politely at odds with me over my terminology. Not least because the title 'winemaker' doesn't fit with his long-held philosophy that wine from the world's best vineyards should create itself. 'All the great wines from California and Europe were guided by people who didn't see themselves as "makers". They were simply enabling a natural process, he says. It's the traditional way Paul always wanted to work with wine-hands-off, minimal intervention, no compromises. And at Ridge, high up in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California, that is exactly what he has done for 30 vintages, year in year out: no chopping and changing with fashion, just consistently great wine.

Certainly, there is 'no doubting the pedigree of Paul's wines. In a Decanter article last year, Serena Sutcliffe MW volunteered Ridge Monte Bello as her all-time 'favourite New World Cabernet Sauvignon, 'for its sheer, utter complexity'. In another Decanter piece, Steven Spurrier quoted Harry Waugh's assessment of Monte Bello as 'the Latour of California'. However, following a tasting of 30 Monte Bello vintages in Los Angeles Spurrier felt, 'this was flattering to La Tour.'

Paul Draper grew up on a farm in Illinois. 'I was very close to nature and felt an early connection with the earth.' However, wine didn't feature until he went to high school in Connecticut. There, his roommate was a Swiss-American whose parents lived in New York and through them he discovered a taste for fine European wines. 'For a kid that age it was a marvellous awakening and it's where my love of wine began,' he recalls.

By the time he went to California's Stanford University to read philosophy, Paul was assiduously tasting, noting and occasionally collecting everything worthy of his attention. That same year, he also experienced his first vinous epiphany. 'A fellow student asked me to a Thanksgiving dinner in Dry Creek Valley', he says. 'When I got there, a trestle table went through the house from porch to porch, loaded with food and wine as four generations sat down to eat. As I took in this beautiful scene of family and a home surrounded by vines, I knew I had to be part of it. I wanted to work with the land and with wine.'

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Yet, the young Paul could see no way of achieving his ambition to make wine. 'My chemistry simply wasn't up to it, he says. So he buried the urge and got on with enjoying life, studying philosophy and taking an eclectic mix of extra-curricular classes in political theory, art and music. It's one reason why Paul is one of the few winemakers who can just as easily hold forth on existentialism, architecture and Mozart as much as he can on fining and filtration...in four different languages.

The language ability was acquired at Monterey school directly after Stanford. Part of the plan was to avoid the Vietnam draft and get a less life-threatening overseas posting. Amazingly, Paul got a dream job as a civilian attache just outside Venice. But rather than go straight there, he toured and tasted around the cities of Europe on a Moto Guzzi motorbike.

In the Veneto, Paul drank in the dolce vita and who can blame him. Skiing, hand-made suits and a 500 year-old villa were all part of the lifestyle. Most his friends were Italian, many involved in wine, which featured daily. After Italy, he bought a 2CV and moved to Paris to study French at the Sorbonne. 'It was another incredible experience,' he says with a grin. 'In those days, first growths were affordably cheap and I took full advantage.' Not surprisingly, Paul was utterly seduced by Europe's wines and culture. His whole approach to wine had been re-fashioned by Europe and it would make a lasting impression.

His next Hemingway-esque adventure was in South America after a bout of Stanford grad work in Spanish and political science. Being the 1960s, he found himself in Chile working on various community development projects. One of them provided the opportunity to make wine. 'Suddenly, I had the chance to do what I had always thought was impossible,' he recalls.

'Having worked with vintners in Italy, I had finally realised that you didn't need a degree in oenology to make wine. Moreover, my own tasting experience and knowledge taught me that the great wines of Europe and of California from the 1930s were made without technology,' he says. Meanwhile, Paul read voraciously. But not the fermentation science coming out of Davis University, instead, he went back to the original 19th-century winemaking texts, mainly from France but also from America. 'They were very sound, very traditional and taught me everything I needed to know to begin working with wine.'

Through friends, he was also invited to Bordeaux in 1968, where he scrutinised that difficult vintage at several great châteaux. And it confirmed everything he believed in. 'Their reasons for doing things weren't scientific,' he says. 'They were empirical and very straightforward.'

In hindsight, Chile was perfect for what came next at Ridge: Paul was working with Cabernet from a non-irrigated coast range site and it was also the opportunity to put into practice his non-interventionist philosophy by, 'doing as little as possible—taking the ripe fruit, not adding yeast or malo-lactic bacteria and allowing it to ferment and age into a stable, complex wine'.

So, as the political situation disintegrated in Chile, Paul found himself back in California at a wine tasting in Palo Alto in 1969. Also present was Dave Bennion, a Stanford research scientist who, with a few colleagues, had bought a 19th-century winery and mountain vineyard planted with old, low-yield Cabernet vines. It was called Ridge and it was just six miles from Stanford.

The two men had much in common -idealism, commitment and a 'hands-off' approach to wine. Paul visited the time-warp winery in the wild, rural, Appalachian-like setting high above Silicon Valley. He also tasted Bennion's early Monte Bello Cabernets. Some were rather rustic, but others were extraordinary. 'They had a phenomenal richness, complexity and depth. I knew we had the chance to make truly great wine,' says Paul, who was offered the wine-maker's job and took it on the spot. 'This was where I wanted to be.'

In those days, Ridge was a cross between counter-culture refuge and struggling small business. Everyone was committed but not necessarily to the same direction. It was eccentric and unprofessional at best, chaotic and uneconomic at worst. The daunting challenge for Paul Draper was to preserve its good points and winkle out the bad. Working with the founding partners, slowly but surely, he turned it round from a week-end hobby into one of the most respected winemaking operations in the world.

It wasn't easy given the culture of the place. He brought in new equipment and set up rosters. He remodelled the winery, created a high-tech lab which is now the envy of California. When he could, he hired a few like-minded professionals, found new vineyards and replanted on the Ridge.

To do all this, Paul borrowed money to become a partner in the enterprise. Miraculously, while Ridge grew

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in stature its ethos remained largely the same. 'In the early days, there was no hierarchy, only a slight bump in the middle,' says Paul. Paul remembers those early years particularly fondly. 'There was no publicity, just a modest salary. We were privileged to have been given that private period when there was no attention. It meant we could focus purely on making great wine from great vineyards. At the same time, we were risking everything to do this—it wasn't a game; we weren't a boutique winery; everything was on the line. Yet we were like kids whose entire lives were given to this pursuit of the holy grail. It was a labour of love.'

And, of course, it gave birth to some wonderful, legendary wines. Without doubt, the 1970 Monte Bello is one of the great red wines of the century. Similarly, his 1970 and 1973 Geyserville Zinfandels and the 1974 Lytton Springs zin, not to mention the extraordinary 1971 York Creek Petite Sirah are all benchmark classics. Since those early wines, many more titanic vintages have followed along with new additions to the portfolio, such as Bridgehead Mataro and Chardonnay and Merlot from the Santa Cruz Mountains.

With Monte Bello in particular, Paul's aim was to achieve greatness through balance, structure and harmony. However, in so doing, he has been criticised for changing. Ridge's style which, pre 1969, was noted for its four-square intensity, purity and power. Perhaps so, but Paul made a telling revelation to David Darlington in his book *Angel's Visits*. 'With methods that the rest of California hadn't used for 50 years, Ridge was making some of the best wines of the day. Many people thought our grapes were the equal of first growth Bordeaux. But the wines lacked finesse,' he says. 'I think Dave's (Bennion) aim was to make good wine but not one of the great wines of the world. That wasn't rigorous enough for me.'

And Paul is nothing if not rigorous. It was this quality that drove him to secure some of the best fruit in California by 'locating a group of single vineyards capable of producing a consistent, distinctive and individual character'. Perhaps surprisingly, he regards this as his proudest achievement at Ridge, but then Paul is a fervent terroiriste, very much in the European mould. Last year, he told Tim Atkin in *Decanter* issue that, 'my aim is to take these pieces of ground... and allow them to express themselves. What I demand of a great wine is that it reflects nature, not the hand of the winemaker; it has to have that connection to the earth. But to express it, you need mature vines and grapes from unique sites.'

He describes his next best achievement as, 'establishing approaches to handling those grapes which could more consistently produce great wine'. This includes painstakingly separating grapes into vineyard parcels—33 from Monte Bello and half that number from each Zinfandel vineyard. As for the rest, you know the drill—low yields, natural yeasts, frequent racking and minimal fining. Meanwhile, monitor everything in the lab.

Interestingly, for a Europhile, Paul eschews French oak. He experiments with it, but continues to prefer air-dried American oak for Zinfandel and Cabernet. Moreover, with Monte Bello it emphasises the point that he isn't making imitation Bordeaux.

But which variety does Paul love best? 'It is no secret that I joined Ridge because of Cabernet and Monte Bello,' he says. 'But Ridge also introduced me to full-bodied, complex Zins and it was love at first sight. So it is like having two children who are quite different, but whom you love equally. Cabernet is more formal and intellectual, while Zinfandel is more rustic and sensuous, especially in its youth. Monte Bello remains an essential focus. But Zinfandel is a very important part of Ridge and California, and produces such delicious wine when given as much care and attention as Cabernet.'

During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s the recognition began to grow. It also thrust Paul Draper into a spotlight that he is now used to but is still not entirely comfortable with. 'I guess the best thing about it is that it means we can proselytise to others. We have a better chance of being heard and preserving a winemaking philosophy which, in California, dates back before Prohibition to the 19th century.'

Scratch the polished surface and you'll find a passionate man who has strong and considered opinions on every aspect of wine and most other things too. For instance, Paul supports the idea of Biodynamics, albeit with specific reservations. He believes in wine's ability to connect us to the soil and seasons—the cycle of life. He opposes the general adherence to the post-Prohibition approach of technologically processed wine as championed by Davis. In contrast, Paul questions everything, saying, 'it is the only way to improve'.

These days, though still winemaker, Paul is no longer a partner at Ridge. In the mid-1980s, the winery was discreetly put up for sale and a couple of multi-nationals got very excited. But they were beaten to the punch by a Japanese businessman, Akihiko Otsuka, who promised to keep everything just as it was. The partners

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closed the deal in record time for less money than they could have got elsewhere, but that's Ridge for you—gloriously idiosyncratic. What's more, Otsuka has kept his word. Nothing changed, except that Ridge got even better.

Certainly, it's been another fabulous decade up at Ridge. Paul attributes this to the 50 people around him, singling out his viticulturalist, David Gates and winemaking colleagues Eric Baugher and John Olney.

As for the future: 'As long as I can taste well, I will stay involved, but I'm interested in handing responsibilities over to Eric and John. I've been so focused that there are a lot of personal challenges I want to pursue—Buddhism, walking, mythology and music, among others!' He also wants to spend more time with his wife Maureen and daughter Caitlin. However, Paul is unlikely to hang up his winery boots yet—he's only 63 years young. 'I got a nice job offer to stay on till I'm 90.' Let's hope he does, because by my reckoning that's another 27 vintages to go. ■

COLLEAGUES, CRITICS AND FRIENDS PAY TRIBUTE TO PAUL DRAPER

Serena Sutcliffe MW—The doyen of the California wine world, though a less stuffy doyen you could not find. A classicist and an innovator. A modest but determined man talking about 'European' terroir, natural yeasts and minimum intervention. A recent vertical of Monte Bello back to 1969, his first vintage, confirmed for me that Paul is in a class of his own.

Hugh Johnson—Know the wine; know the man. Big egos and block-buster wines are all too familiar. Think of a wine that's balanced, ages slowly, is modest, generous, thoughtful, good-humoured—yes, it's Paul Draper. Paul is (I hope he'll forgive me) the most European of Californians. Which makes the Ridge range, from classical, almost immortal Monte Bello, to the world's most toothsome Zins, all the more of an achievement.

Jancis Robinson MW—He has gone his own magnificent way—making and tasting wine—at Ridge for more than 30 years. It seems wonderfully appropriate that way up on the Monte Bello Ridge he operates on a different plane from other California producers.

Robert Mondavi—From the start, his wines reflected the philosophy that a wine's most significant characteristics come from the soil. He was interested in producing quality wines, even when there was little market for them.

Steven Spurrier—In early 1976, choosing the wines for what was to become the Paris Tasting, I was given Ridge Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon 1971 blind and took it for a Chateau Beychevelle 1970. At the recent Masters of Wine tasting of California Cabernets, the Monte Bello 1994 stole the show, proving that the hallmark of a great winemaker is not brilliance but consistency.

Angelo Bija—'Paul Draper has enhanced the quality and reputation of Zinfandel as no one else has done. Others, initially, may have dismissed it in favour of seemingly more commercial wines, but Paul's commitment is an example of his wisdom and strength of personality. Quality always wins—with wine and people.' Christian Moueix—'I have always admired Paul Draper for his dedication to his wines and his classic style of winemaking. Consequently, his wines are wonderful to drink with a finish as long as a sentence of Marcel Proust, the French author for whom he and I share an admiration.'

Aubert de Villaine—Paul Draper has always set himself the highest standards which can be thought of as typically Burgundian: the importance of terroir, expressed through a unique grape variety and adhering to the strict rules which result from this. He is a friend that I see rarely but meet daily through the 'philosophy' that we both practice.