



RIDGE

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: US
OWNER: OTSUKA PHARMECEUTICALS CO

Ridge retains its position as the top North American and Californian producer on the Most Admired list, keeping the number seven position for the second year running.

Phrases such as “minimum intervention” are all the rage in winemaking these days, but Ridge was way ahead of the curve and it was largely by looking back to vineyard and winemaking techniques used in the Bordeaux and California of the 19th century that its glowing international reputation was formed.

Ridge’s fame started to be hewn when it was placed fifth in the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting. At the 30th anniversary tasting in 2006 it went several steps further, with its 1971 Monte Bello Cabernet winning first place in the original vintage category and the 2000 ranking top for new vintages.

The driving force behind the accumulation of Ridge’s prestige points goes to Paul Draper, who stepped down as chief winemaker and CEO in 2016 after 47 years with the company, during which time he put old vine Zinfandel back on the world’s serious wine map and coined the phrase “pre-industrial winemaking” to describe Ridge’s organic and sustainable approach to viticulture and production.

Writing in 2011, he explained the ethos, which still endures at Ridge to this day. “Pre-industrial winemaking begins with respect for the natural process that transforms fresh grapes into wine, and the 19th-century model of minimum intervention,” he said. “When you have great vineyards that produce high-quality grapes of distinctive individual character, this is not only an environmentally and socially responsible approach, it’s also the best way to consistently make fine wine.”

Draper’s philosophy is ably carried forward by vineyard guru David Gates, Monte Bello site winemaker Eric Baugher and John Olney, in charge of production at Lytton Springs in Sonoma County.

VILLA MARIA

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: NEW ZEALAND
OWNER: SIR GEORGE FISTONICH

It may have Felton Road breathing down its neck, but for now Villa Maria clings on to the highest rank for a New Zealand wine brand on our list. It clearly helps to have been playing the long game. Villa Maria was founded by Sir George Fistonich in 1961, long before the country became the go-to source for New World Sauvignon Blanc, and he remains at the helm as CEO officer today.

But for longevity, don’t read conservatism. The producer is constantly moving forward, refining its approach to terroir, viticulture and winemaking under chief winemaker Nick Piccone, and bringing new wines to the market. Albariño is a recent addition to the more familiar Kiwi fare of Sauvignon and Pinot Noir.

A major move in 2017 was the establishment of House of Fine Wine, a distribution partnership in Australia with that country’s Henschke and Champagne house Bollinger. Other stand-out performances in export markets last year were the UK, the US, Canada and Ireland, and domestic sales remain strong.

“We continue to see excellent growth in global terms for the brand,” says chief operating officer Richard Thomas. “This is being driven by a healthy combination of value appreciation for our main SKUs in key opportunity markets and growth in our higher-tier wines.

“We’re one of the few remaining New Zealand family-owned wineries of our size and are able to make exceptional quality wines for the more casual occasion, right up to limited release wines from exceptional terroirs for the connoisseur.

“When you ally these with our commitment to

sustainability, investment in organic practices and the fact we have always had a long-term view of the wine industry from an environmental perspective, the Villa Maria brand and what we stand for resonates with people.”

