



Ridge Vineyards in Northern California champions single-vineyard winemaking, searching California for those rare and exceptional vineyards where climate, soil, and variety are ideally matched.



Monte Bello Cabernet grapes.

Ridge Vineyards of California

I USUALLY WRITE about wines from the old world (Europe) and occasionally the new world (Argentina and Australia), because these areas produce most of the wines I prefer to drink. Here, I will focus on one of my favorite wine producers worldwide, which is Ridge Vineyards from Northern California. Ridge was started in 1962 by four engineers from the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) and for the first decade (1959–1969) was under the direction of David Bennion, founder and winemaker, a man I never met.

Ridge's history goes back to 1885 when Dr. Osea Perrone bought 180 acres near the top of Monte Bello Ridge in the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco. After constructing the winery, (still in use today), the first wine was produced in 1892.

The SRI engineers produced wine in 1960 and 1961 that was of such quality that they renamed and rebranded the winery in 1962 at which time Dave Bennion left his role at SRI and devoted his full time to the winery.

A BARRINGTON HILLS CONNECTION

Most of the recent impact on Ridge Vineyards

can be traced to my dear friend Paul Draper. He was born in Evanston, Illinois, and spent part of his youth in Barrington Hills. He graduated from Stanford with a degree in philosophy and endowed with great intelligence and a seemingly endless desire to create multiple wines which rate among the world's finest, he forged such a path to accomplish same. He spent years post-college time in Italy and France where he studied traditional winemaking practices. He then went to Chile where he and an associate, Fritz Maytag, produced several vintages of old vine Cabernet Sauvignon. The quality of these wines earned the respect of the owners of Ridge Vineyards in 1969 at which time he was offered the position of winemaker. He continued in this capacity and as president until 2016 when he became chairman.

Paul's impact on the wine world would be hard to overestimate. He is a self-trained wine master with having been greatly influenced by the time he spent in Italy and France. He is the original spokesman for the belief that "wine is made in the vineyard," and therefore intervenes as little as possible or necessary in the making of the wine. Ridge wines are neither organic nor bio-dynamic



Ridge wines from Jim Bryant's cellar.

but always show evidence of Paul's minimalist intervention philosophy. He also is known for his focus on specific vineyard sites and bottlings. This is true with respect to Zinfandel wines. Ridge's Geyserville vineyard is perhaps the oldest (125-year-old vines) and most famous hallowed ground for Zinfandel and is my favorite site for one of the wines I enjoy most.

Perhaps a word or two about why I chose Ridge Vineyards when in fact I drink mainly old-world wines. In fact, because of Paul's profound influence on Ridge wines, these wines most often resemble the best examples of old-world wines except for the Zinfandels, which are the best worldwide, but still evidence the even handling that makes them so food friendly.

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Ridge's Lytton Springs Winery



Ridge's Monte Bello Winery

AMONG THE BEST WINES

Ridge is the only winery on earth that I would be proud to put any of its wines in my cellar. There are multiple examples of famous wineries which consistently produce some of the best examples of one or even two types of wine, but Ridge does multiple offerings most years and they are always among the best. In fact, I read an article several years ago with advice to anyone who is asked by a group at dinner to pick the wine for the table. The answer was to pick any wine on the list from Ridge and let the sommelier or the waiter pick the food for the guests.

RIDGE MONTE BELLO CABERNET

Finally, I will focus on my three favorite Ridge wines. The most famous is the Ridge Monte Bello (\$200) which is mostly Cabernet Sauvignon from the Santa Cruz Mountains. This wine is always among my favorite U.S. Cabernets and generally among my favorite Cabernets worldwide. The wines remind me most of Bordeaux and especially Château Latour (at one-third to ½ the price) and mature at a slow rate. Note that the 1971 Ridge Monte Bello was chosen by Steven Spurrier for the famous 1976 Judgement of Paris Wine event and Steven thought it would be the top American entry, but in fact Stag's Leap Wine Cellars entry came in first, beating all others including the French wines. Note, however, in the 2006 anniversary event of the same wines, 1971 Monte Bello took first place by 18 points over the second-place wine.

My favorite Monte Bello wine is the 1991 vintage, one of the best in my opinion. The ruby color at the rim shows signs of slow aging with a nose of bramble, black currents, dill, earth, baking spices, and vanilla. The palate has moderate acidity and

tannins and echoes the notes from the nose. The finish is rich, long, and about as good as wine can be. Regarding one of my favorite past vintages of this wine, Paul called me one day and asked me which vintage of Monte Bello I would like for him to pour at the Wine Spectator Wine Experience in Chicago. I said any vintage would make me happy, but he insisted I choose one. I had recently been in love with the 1984. I found out later when drinking this with him at the event that he had to go to the secondary market to procure enough to pour. What a wine and what a friend!

RIDGE GEYSERVILLE ZINFANDEL

I love Zinfandel from the Geyserville vineyard (\$50). The 2018 is drinking well now with the acids and tannins a perfect foil for barbecue ribs, burgers, or Mexican, Indian, or Asian cuisine. As is the case for all Ridge Zinfandels, this is not a fruit bomb, but a well-balanced wine meant to be a food wine. The red and black fruits are evident on the nose along with white pepper and the long finish shows cherry, plums, and black pepper on the palate.

RIDGE MONTE BELLO CHARDONNAY

The final wine is the rare Ridge Monte Bello Chardonnay. This wine is hard to find and costs about \$80. The 2013 is one of my favorite vintages and one of the greatest Chardonnays I have had from anywhere. Having always been hard to find as it is produced only in the greatest years, some of the rare vines are so old that the grapes are included in the less expensive Estate Chardonnay, which is also an excellent choice. The 2013 I chose to review is about as good as one can imagine and competes well with those costing 2–10 times its price. It is a big wine but balanced on the nose of citrus and tropical fruits and vanilla, as well as displaying a



Paul Draper is Ridge Vineyards' chairman. He grew up on an 80-acre farm in Barrington Hills.

fierce backbone of acidity and minerality evident in the long finish. This is truly a wine worth expending the time and money to have at least once in your life. Happy hunting in your quest for any of these outstanding wines. À Votre Santé! 🍷



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

Barrington resident Jim Bryant is pursuing his passion and love of wine as an international wine consultant. This follows a 30-year career in senior financial and general management positions at two Fortune 100 companies. He is the owner of James R. Bryant L.L.C.; contact him at profwino@comcast.net.