Ridge - a California exception

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See full tasting notes on Purple pages.

California wine can be frustrating for those of us who live outside the United States. Thanks to recent swollen crops and plummeting sales of California's many ambitiously priced wines, there is a glut of good wine – much of it finding its way into keenly priced bottles carrying a plethora of negociant labels. American wine buyers are currently spoilt for choice in the $10-$30 a bottle range.

But in California's major export markets such as the UK, practically all we see are the cut-price likes of Blossom Hill, Gallo's cheaper lines, Sutter Home and Turner Road. Clusters of smarter California wines can be found lingering on posh restaurant wine lists around the world bearing vintages that attest to a wave of enthusiasm on the part of a past sommelier, or a particularly favourable exchange rate, but they tend to sell painfully slowly. While the California economy was booming, it sheltered high-end producers in the golden state from the harsh reality that their wines are overpriced compared with international competition. With such a vast and long-buoyant domestic market on their doorstep, few California wine producers put much effort into exporting.

But in these leaner times, many of the California wine operations that are not backed by a large fortune are suffering badly. They are not helped by the limited options available within the confines of America's highly regulated distribution system. Direct shipping to consumers can be severely restricted, and the diminishing number of distributors tend to represent too many labels to give any but the most powerful enough attention.

Then there is the question of style. It has become routine for California's red wines, and some of the whites, to notch up alcohol levels of 15% and above, their colour 'enhanced' not unusually by a shot of a grape concentrate such as Mega Purple.

Napa Valley Cabernets, arguably California's signature wines, have come to be picked later and later, by winemakers apparently terrified of the slightest hint of herbaceousness or tannins with any chewiness to them, so that they typically taste sweet, strong, and so smooth that they can be more like cocoa than the archetype of Cabernet-based wine, red bordeaux. Not necessarily bad, but certainly not the most digestible or food-friendly style of wine.

One California winery provides a particularly obvious exception to all these generalities. Ridge, perched 900 metres above the Pacific on the San Andreas fault on a ridge above Silicon Valley south of San Francisco, has been producing appetising, claret-style wines for half a century now, and has built up a faithful international clientele. Its top wine, Monte Bello, made from their finest Bordeaux grape varieties grown in the 19th-century vineyards around the 1886 redwood winery, is modestly priced by California standards, while the second, earlier-maturing wine labelled Santa Cruz Mountains Estate is a steal. The average alcohol level of these wines over the last 10 years has been just over 13%.

Paul Draper, Ridge's CEO and head winemaker, visits the UK, Ridge's most important export market, at least once a year, but also travels widely in the rest of Europe. What may help Ridge wines' appeal to the British, apart from the relatively moderate pricing, is Ridge's steadfast adherence to traditional winemaking techniques and a style that is unashamedly modelled on that of the Bordeaux first growths, with the twist that Draper and team favour well-seasoned American oak above barrels imported from France.

A small group of wine writers and wine merchants gathered in California last week to celebrate Ridge's half-century and Draper's 40 years on the ridge (where he lives). These anniversaries are approximate. It was in 1959 that Ridge's wooden barns and ancient vines began to be recuperated by a a small group of Stanford scientists (see picture) who decided to indulge in low-tech winemaking as a weekend hobby. By the 1960s they were producing small amounts of highly ambitious wine and at the end of the decade decided to hire a full-time winemaker, inspired by a trial lot of wine Draper had made while working for the Peace Corps in Chile. The still robust Monte Bello 1970 was Draper's first solo vintage. The more fragile 1971 performed well at the famous Judgment of Paris France v California tasting in 1976 and was the overall favourite in the re-run 30 years later.

Since 1986 Ridge has been owned by the Japanese pharmaceutical company Otsuka but you certainly wouldn't know it. The Ridge team is still more like a group of inspired academics than anything remotely corporate. Formal oenological training is eschewed. Draper claims that his wine training was tasting the great wines of Europe and remains suspicious of anyone inculcated with winemaking orthodoxy. 'We have to retrain anyone who arrives with an oenology degree', he maintains. Current winemaker Eric Baugher is a microbiologist who came to Ridge in 1994 via a graduate project in its surprisingly high-tech lab. At Ridge wine is made by blind tasting, tasting and tasting again.

When we arrived at Ridge for the celebrations, our first task was to taste two samples of the 2008 Monte Bello blind and decide whether the one with an additional 9/10 of one per cent of first press wine was superior to the sample without. That night, with a fine though non-flashy dinner at Marché in nearby Menlo Park, we sipped a dozen vintages of Monte Bello back to 1968, the only wine of the lot that was less than magnificent.

The following day we moved en masse to Sonoma, centre of operations for Ridge's other great speciality: old-vine Zinfandel, as shown in one of the Lytton vineyards above. Above we are, enjoying lots of different 208s with lunch at Lytton Springs winery (where the rather puzzling picture below was taken, Draper halfway down the table on the right). Typically, when it was discovered that this variety, long associated with California, had its origins in Croatia, Ridge's head viticulturist David Gates, who has been at Ridge since 1989, went there to see for himself.

Most California Zinfandel is massively proportioned, with flavours ranging from jammy through berries to porty. But Ridge's single-vineyard Zins are unusually restrained, structured, refined and complex. Again over dinner, at the Healdsburg Hotel's Dry Creek Kitchen this time, we tasted a dozen Ridge Zinfandels back to a Lytton Springs 1973, the only wine over the whole two days that seemed to show any sign of age. Zin needs higher alcohols to show its character but, in contrast to the current California norm, most of these wines were in the 14-15% range.

In the bowels of the Monte Bello winery, goatee'd, 74-year-old Draper had told us portentously, 'high alcohol is the choice of the proprietor. It is not dictated by global warming.' It is probably just as well that he lives in such relative isolation.

Some Ridge favourites

Chardonnay Monte Bello 2006
From $39.99 and £34.75

Santa Cruz Mountains Estate 2006
From $32.99 and £28.49

Monte Bello – virtually any vintage
From $89.99 and £79.99

Geyserville and Lytton Springs Zinfandel – almost any vintage
From $24.95 and £23.49

See full tasting notes on Purple pages and also Ridge - high tech, low tech and The original Monte Bello