

THE MONDAVIS: A NAPA VALLEY DYNASTY

Read our special four part insight into the Mondavi legacy, looking back over four generations worth of winemaking and the events that bought the family's Californian wines to international acclaim.

PART I

Thursday, 26 December 2013

by Gerald Asher

Late in November, the harvest complete, there was a week-end of Mondavi family celebrations in Napa Valley. Peter Mondavi, the family patriarch since Robert's death in 2008, presided over a large dinner party at the Charles Krug winery, where the full conjunction of the Mondavis with Napa Valley can be said to have begun.

The dinner marked Peter's 99th birthday while recognizing the transformation of the winery itself. An extensive visitor reception area created from the old redwood tank room, had guests admiring its warm elegance, an inviting space that nevertheless preserved the character of the oldest winery in the valley.

Timothy Mondavi, Robert's younger son, had given a dinner the night before to celebrate the completion of the first phase of the new Continuum winery at the summit of Pritchard Hill, the venture he had started in 2005 with his father and his sister, Marcia, after the sale of the Robert Mondavi Winery. Michael, his older brother had also invited the extended family and others to a lunch that weekend to mark the progress of the Michael Mondavi Estate, his own family venture, with extensive vineyards high on Atlas Peak and in the cool, bay-side Carneros.

The story started when Robert's and Peter's parents, Cesare and Rosa Mondavi, originally from Italy's Marche, moved from Minnesota to Lodi soon after Prohibition started in 1919. They came to organise the buying and shipping of fresh grapes for Italian-Americans – and others – who wanted to take advantage of a provision in the law allowing families to make a limited quantity of wine each year for their own consumption.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, Cesare, who had built a considerable business network over years of working with local grape growers, helped them organise their own winery, Acampo (in which he had a personal stake) to absorb their fruit. Soon he had also taken a stake in a bulk-wine facility in Napa Valley: the Sunny St. Helena Winery.



L-R: Cesare Mondavi, Robert Mondavi and Rosa Mondavi at Stanford University in 1936. (Image credit: UC Davis Special Collections)

Cesare's experience had taught him what to expect of grapes from the state's varied regions, and he saw unique qualities in those of Napa Valley. Eventually, he made a full commitment there by selling his interest in Acampo and buying out his partner in Sunny St. Helena. Robert, his elder son, now graduated from Stanford, where he had studied economics and business while taking summer winemaking courses at U.C.Davis, managed the winery for him.

Sunny St. Helena produced bulk wine for shipment to bottlers in and out of state. The lack of a bottling line placed the winery at a disadvantage: the United States, now at war, imposed price controls on bulk wine (and most other agricultural commodities), but not on bottled, branded wine.

Robert was frustrated by the constraint imposed on him. He heard that the historic Charles Krug winery, just north of St. Helena, was for sale. Though still impressive in scale, and legendary as the oldest in Napa Valley (founded in 1861), the winery had decayed, like so many others during Prohibition and the Depression years that followed.

By 1943, no wine had been made there for some while, but there was a bottling line and, most impressive of all, the winery stood in its own 147 acres of prime Napa Valley vineyard.

Robert persuaded his father to buy it. The family could sell wine more profitably in bottle and owning the Charles Krug name would allow them to promote a brand with a long history while building recognition for the quality of what they produced. With the vineyards, they could also control the source of at least some of their fruit with the guarantees that gave them.

Despite the difficulty of obtaining building materials in war-time, Robert soon brought the winery up to operating condition, and was able to crush that year's crop there. The family decided to sell only their best wines under the Charles Krug name; the second quality, mostly what would otherwise have been sold as bulk wine at Sunny St. Helena, they bottled under the CK label.

PART 2

Friday, 27 December 2013

by Gerald Asher

When the war ended, Peter, Robert's younger brother, joined Robert at the winery. He brought more extensive winemaking skills acquired and developed during his years at U.C.Davis. While there, he had worked, in particular, on researching the benefits of cold fermentation, a new phenomenon in California. And he used what he had learned to great effect at Charles Krug.

Thanks to the brothers' combined, complementary skills, Krug quickly gained recognition for the quality of its table wines at a time when most California wineries were emphasising sweet fortified products – pseudo ports and sherries – in which mistakes in the vineyard and flaws in wine making were easily disguised.

When Consumer Reports gave its first ever evaluation of quality California table wines in 1956, the Charles Krug winery had more recommendations for its wines than any other.

I have a note of tasting the Charles Krug Cabernet Sauvignon 1956 at a dinner party in 1979. After more

than 20 years, its fruit was still persistent and its finish softly appealing. A Louis Martini 1951 that followed seemed at first austere in comparison.

That 1956 Cabernet Sauvignon was probably made from, grapes grown on the To Kalon vineyard at Oakville, just south of St. Helena.

To Kalon, a prized site at the heart of Napa Valley, had been planted originally in the 1870s, and from the beginning its wines had had a high reputation. Its red wine, in particular – sold under the generic name of Burgundy, as was the custom at the time – was recognised as one of the best produced in the valley.



The Charles Krug Estate (Image credit: CharlesKrug.com)

No one then spoke of terroir or associated any particular vineyard with specific characteristics. But everyone recognised the quality of To Kalon wines.

After changes of ownership – and probably changes of variety to suit the need for 'shipping' grapes during Prohibition – a new owner had replanted To Kalon in the 1940s, introducing there French varieties, particularly Cabernet Sauvignon, and also Sauvignon Blanc.

The Mondavis at Charles Krug had begun buying To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon since well before making that 1956 I had tasted. In 1962 they seized an opportunity they were given to buy 500 acres of the estate and the combination of Mondavi skills with the fruit of this special site gave further impetus to the brothers' growing reputation.

PART 3

Monday, 30 December 2013

by Gerald Asher

Also in 1962, Robert and his wife, Marjorie, made their first trip to Europe. They toured the wine regions, met and talked with winegrowers, and paid great attention to everything they saw. On his return, Robert was keen to apply some of what he had learned at the Charles Krug winery. His enthusiasm knew no bounds and perhaps for that reason alone, met with stiff resistance from Peter, who, as winemaker, might have taken the proposed changes as implied criticism of what he had been doing.

It was doubtless difficult for him to accept what were, to him, arbitrary changes, when the winery had been receiving nothing but accolades. In any case, Peter's resentment and refusal to co-operate with Robert's ideas, led to increasingly bitter confrontations. Eventually, in 1965, their mother, chairman of the winery since their father's death, told Robert to take a leave of absence and to cool down.

Robert took time to reflect and talk to friends. Convinced that if Napa Valley – and California – was to take its proper place in the greater world of wine, it had to absorb the lessons already learned by others and to compete with them on their own terms, he put together loans and investments and on land adjacent to the To Kalon vineyard at Oakville, he built a new winery. It was in every sense a dramatic statement.

From the beginning, the iconic arch and tower of the Robert Mondavi Winery, with its echo of early Mission architecture but a modern, open design, were seen as both symbolic of the past and a pledge to the future. Today, more than 50 years later, it has become the most widely recognised symbol of Napa Valley.

The split in the family caused considerable grief, both to the Mondavis themselves and to their friends. But with hindsight, we can see that even had Robert and Peter been able to come to terms, the result would have been at best a lukewarm compromise. Peter felt instinctively that there was too much at stake in what had been achieved at Charles Krug to move dramatically in a new direction.

Robert knew that his ideas, based on what he had seen and learned, had to be grasped wholeheartedly or not at all. And, though probably unaware of the extent to

which his gesture would change the image and future of Napa Valley and of viticultural California as a whole, grasp them he did.

He set to work: his team crushed 1966 grapes even before the roof was on the new winery (it was a cool year with a delayed harvest, which helped). From the beginning, Robert had an unerring sense of quality – not only in the fruit he bought, but also in the talent he hired to get the new winery started. The winemakers who joined him in those early years included Warren Winiarski and Mike Grgich, both soon to produce wines that stunned tasters at the memorable California-France Paris tasting of 1976, and Zelma Long, whose international reputation is now probably unrivalled.



The first vintage (1966) of Robert Mondavi Winery's Cabernet Sauvignon is released in 1968 (Image credit: Robert Mondavi Winery)

In his memoir, *Harvests of Joy*, Robert explains that his focus was on Cabernet Sauvignon, but he knew none would soon be ready for sale. Cash flow demanded that he also pay attention to wines that could be ready sooner. He made a light, Gamay rosé, fermented at low temperature to retain its fruit and grace. It was not the wine by which he wanted the new winery to be identified, but it was released the following spring to an enthusiastic reception. He had also been successful in obtaining some exceptional Sauvignon Blanc.

Because of mishandling, the variety had a weak reputation in California – poor man's Chardonnay, it was called – and Robert knew that no matter how appealing the wine he might make, the variety's associations would be an obstacle. Yet he knew that as blanc fumé the very same variety was used to produce exceptional wines at Sancerre, Pouilly-sur-Loire and elsewhere along the Loire valley.

After cool fermentation to preserve the variety's lively aroma, he gave the wine a short aging in French oak barrels to round it out and give extra depth. He then modified the French name of the grape to Fumé Blanc and released it to immediate success.

That wine reversed the fortunes of Sauvignon Blanc in California, and whether under that name or as Fumé Blanc, it has remained a varietal mainstay ever since.

PART 4

Tuesday, 31 December 2013

by Gerald Asher

Fueled by an injection of cash from the then family-owned Rainier Brewery in Seattle, the Robert Mondavi winery grew rapidly. Robert himself was constantly innovating: he was always the first to adopt new ideas and new technology. Obsessed by quality he was one of the first – perhaps the first – to change the way grapes were bought and sold in Napa Valley.

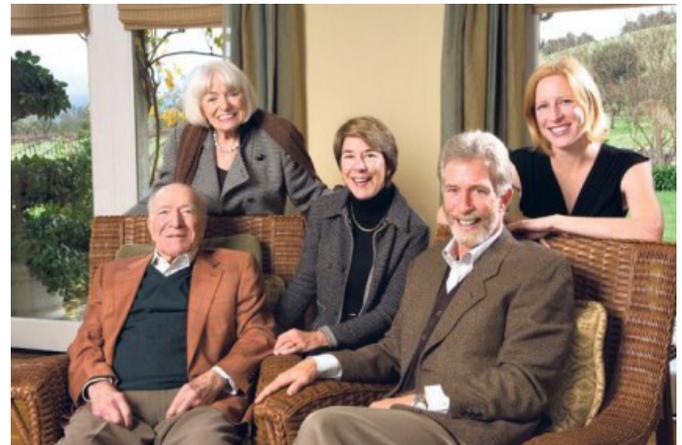
Today's major wineries rely mostly on their own vineyards, but at that time most wineries bought grapes under contract from growers. The growers were concerned about two things: tonnage and brix – their vineyard's yield and the concentration of sugar in the grapes. The price paid to the grower was based on just these two measures, and that set up an intrinsic conflict of interest.

For quality, Robert wanted to limit bunches-per-vine, and for finesse and lively flavor he did not want over-ripe grapes pushed to the limit just for the sake of higher sugar yields. So he contracted with growers at a guaranteed price per acre provided the grower pruned how and when Robert wanted, and picked when he judged the fruit right. That is now standard practice in the valley, but it started with the Robert Mondavi winery.

Along with these and other crucial changes that raised further the real quality of Napa Valley wines, Robert maintained a high profile, for himself and for the winery, both nationally and internationally. He traveled incessantly and brought the world to Napa Valley. His promotional activities – concerts at the winery and cooking seminars with internationally acclaimed chefs – brought a renown and glamor to the valley that changed it forever.

Meanwhile, relations between Robert and his family had deteriorated to a point at which they generated litigation, ended only in 1976. As a result of the judgment, allocating to Robert assets of the Charles Krug winery representing his share of the original family business, Robert acquired the acreage of To Kalon he had purchased for Charles Krug back in 1962 and the winery's warehouses at Woodbridge, near Lodi.

The Woodbridge property was quickly updated and adapted for the production of the line of quality wines, already introduced by Robert and Michael at a separate price point to take full advantage of the growing Robert Mondavi reputation. Sales had taken off and the Napa Valley winery had been working double shifts, six days a week, to keep up with demand. The growth and profitability allowed the winery to position itself for a public offering in 1993. After a successful launch, the company went through the financial ups and downs inevitable in a business based on agriculture, but it continued to grow and to prosper.



The Mondavis that opened Continuum: Back l-r: Robert, Margrit, Marcia, Tim and Carissa Mondavi (Tim's daughter)
(Image credit: Lifestyling® by Maria Gabriela Brito)

As the Robert Mondavi name became ever more dominant in the quality wine world, so the company became more valuable. But, almost inevitably, public ownership led, in due course, to the family's loss of control. For the Robert Mondavi family (now, happily, reconciled and reunited with the Charles Krug side of the family), the connection to the winery launched in 1966 with such brilliance and bravura, ended just before Christmas, 2004, when the majority of shareholders in the publicly held company voted to accept an attractive offer for their shares from Constellation Brands. Now, the only formal link is through Margrit Biever Mondavi, Robert's second wife, who continues to act as an ambassador for the winery.

At breakfast the next day, Robert, ever indefatigably optimistic, is reported to have said to his sons “This is just the beginning.” It was a phrase he had used repeatedly at every step of the growth of the Robert Mondavi winery, and it was not inappropriate now.

Together with his younger son, Tim, and daughter, Marcia, he founded Continuum, a winery to be associated with fruit grown high above the valley floor, the wines reflecting in their intensity and grace the fog-free elevation and the spare nature of the mountainside. Michael set up his own estate, also producing high elevation Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay from vines in the Carneros.

Tasting these new wines were highlights of those days of celebration. They brought their own sense of excitement and expectation. We listened to talk of yet more ventures and partnerships being developed among the fourth generation of Napa Valley Mondavis, the great grand-children of Cesare and Rosa. But the most poignant moments of those two days came at lunch in Michael Mondavi’s house when we tasted the Charles Krug 1965 Cabernet Sauvignon, the last wine Peter and Robert had made there together, and the Robert Mondavi 1974 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, the first for which Michael and Tim were jointly responsible. For years that particular wine, still as remarkable as ever after 40 years, was the touchstone against which all other Cabernet Sauvignons produced in Napa Valley were judged. It was a fitting reminder of all the Mondavis had contributed to Napa Valley.