

## Continuum, continued

9 Jul 2009 by Linda Murphy

It was a relaxed Tim Mondavi who showed me around his Continuum Estate, high atop Pritchard Hill in eastern Napa Valley, with its unrestricted view of the Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville below.



He was upbeat, no longer beaten down by family dynamics and the sale of Robert Mondavi Winery to Constellation Brands in 2004. Of course, Tim isn't happy that his family lost its business, yet he and his sister, Marcia Mondavi Borger, have continued on with Continuum, their wine brand and vineyard estate, and it appears to suit them well.

Marcia is the financial whiz. Tim's children are on the team: Carissa handles communications and hospitality, Chiara is responsible for label design and other artistic needs, and Dante is the cellarmaster. Tim is the winemaker. Robert and his widow, Margrit Biever Mondavi, were the 'visionaries.'

The family (minus Robert's other son, Michael, who has his own wine business, Folio) started Continuum in 2005, and Bob, who died in May 2008, lived long enough to taste the first wine - mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, with sizeable amounts of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot - and visit Cloud View Vineyard - now Continuum Estate - before Tim and Marcia closed escrow on the property in July 2008.

It's an 85-acre site, planted to 26 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon. Merlot vines have been ripped out and will be replaced by 7 acres of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot next spring. Tim says this varietal triumvirate will best express the personality of the estate, which claims Chappellet, Bryant Family and Colgin as neighbours. When the new plantings produce a viable crop, Continuum will be a single wine from a single estate.

'After kicking some tires [see [The Mondavis' new wine](#), Jan 2007], we found the right place,' Tim says. 'This property spoke to us in many ways. It can make great wine. It's on the east side of the valley, with west-facing vines, at elevation (1,500 feet). It's off the main drag (unlike Robert Mondavi Winery), and it's small and fabulous.'

'We're in a bit of a bowl, so the vines are protected from the wind. The temperature lows are a little higher than in Oakville, and the highs are a little lower. We think we have a more moderate temperature situation here, avoiding persistent high temperatures in the summer.'

'We got elegance, silkiness and femininity in the (Mondavi) Oakville wines; Pritchard Hill gives us density and ripeness, along with nuance and elegance.'

The 2006 Continuum is a departure from the Reserve Cabernet Sauvignons Tim produced at Robert Mondavi Winery (see [Great old Mondavi Cabs](#)). It's a bolder, riper wine (15.1% alcohol), with concentrated black fruit, a strong creosote/graphite character, plush texture and smooth tannins. The amount of Petit Verdot - 16% - gives Continuum its tarry edge.

'I fell in love with Malbec from the UC Davis experimental vineyard in Oakville,' Tim says. 'I thought Petit Verdot was too clumsy, with aggressive tannins. But with Malbec, the middle seemed to fall out of the wines with time; Petit Verdot turned into a swan.'

His Mondavi Reserve Cabernet Sauvignons needed cellaring before they revealed themselves, although a US critic or two knocked the wines for being unrewarding and under-fruitful. The 2006 Continuum has impressed these same critics.

Indeed, it's luscious now, suited for those with impatient palates and a taste for ripe fruit. Yet Tim says he expects the wine to age gracefully. If time proves him correct - and frankly, I cannot predict the maturation of this unique wine - Continuum just might be a super wine, pleasing lovers of flamboyant young wines, as well as those who appreciate less obvious wines that have been cellared.

My tasting note below was written from a blind tasting of 2006 California Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines. The next week, I tasted Continuum again, with Tim and Carissa, over an al fresco lunch on a very warm day. Considering that the wine was consumed at a warmer-than-ideal temperature, and that our menu choices seemingly worked against Cabernet (brussels sprouts and asparagus salad, wood-grilled octopus, spring vegetable ribollita, ricotta gnocchi and shrimp pasta with tomato broth), the Continuum was surprisingly harmonious, revealing more nuance with each sip.

In the 2005 through 2007 vintages, Tim used Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot grapes mostly from Marjorie's Vineyard, within the hallowed Mondavi To Kalon Vineyard in Oakville. After Constellation purchased the winery and vineyards, Tim and Marcia were allotted fruit from Marjorie's, in which the ashes of their mother, Marjorie, are scattered. In 2008, Constellation kept all grapes, and will likely continue to do so.

'It's been an incredible silver lining,' Tim says of the loss of To Kalon fruit. 'It forced us to look around and see other areas. It shifted our perspective from To Kalon-centric to the red, rocky volcanic soils of Pritchard Hill, the 1,500-foot elevation at the top, as opposed to the To Kalon valley floor, and the opportunity to make a single wine from a single estate.'

Continuum is produced at The Ranch Winery in St Helena, a custom crush facility that previously was Sutter Home's Zinfandel Lane winery. There Tim has all his own equipment, including a basket press, sorting table and small oak fermenters, similar to those he installed at Mondavi's To Kalon cellar in 2001.

Tim and Marcia have plans to build a winery at Continuum Estate on Pritchard Hill. They most certainly will glance down at Robert Mondavi Winery as they go about their work. 'But Continuum is not an extension of Robert Mondavi Winery,' Tim tells me. 'It's an extension of our dad and family.'

### **Continuum, 2006 Oakville Napa Valley** 17.5 Drink 2009-2017?

Brambly blackberry nose, with leather, tar, mocha and vanilla. Dense and concentrated, with ripe black currant and cassis, liquorice and a strong creosote/graphite streak. Tannins are smooth yet not soft, and the wine closes with refreshing acidity. In only its second vintage, it has no track record for ageing; keep watch. 15.1%. (LM)  
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