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MAKING THE MONDAVI LEGACY NEW AGAIN

By Jay McInerney

Fitzgerald's remark about there being no second acts in American lives is so good, one almost hates to cite counter examples, but Robert Mondavi founded the winery that made him famous at the age of 53, after a successful career at Charles Krug. His son Tim, formerly the winemaker at Robert Mondavi Winery, had the curtain crash down on his own first act when the family lost control of the winery after it went public and was purchased by Constellation Brands, the creators of Wild Irish Rose, in 2004. For his second act, Tim founded Continuum (continuumestate.com), a high-end Napa label, in conjunction with his father and his sister, Marcia Mondavi Borger. The fact that Tim, now 60, was also 53 when he started over is only one of the many curious parallels that make the Mondavi story so emblematic of Napa's winemaking history.

In 1966, Robert and his younger brother Peter literally came to blows at a family picnic. The ostensible cause, according to Robert Mondavi's autobiography "Harvests of Joy," was Peter's accusation that Robert had dipped into company funds to buy his wife a mink coat, but tensions had been building for years between the two, who had different visions for the Charles Krug winery, which their immigrant father had purchased in 1943. After a 1962 trip to Europe in which he'd been inspired by the wines he encountered, notably the great growths of Bordeaux, Robert became passionately devoted to the idea that the Napa Valley could produce wines to rival the greatest of the Old World. Like most of his peers, Peter seemed content to cater to the domestic market with



Erin Kunkel for The Wall Street Journal
FAMILY AFFAIR | Tim Mondavi, his daughter, Carissa, and his sister, Marcia Mondavi Borger, at Continuum Estate.

easygoing, inexpensive wines. After Robert founded his own winery, his drive, his technological innovations and his proselytizing helped raise the bar for Napa Cabernet and to create the market for premium California wines, his partnership with Baron Phillip de Rothschild in the creation of Opus One being perhaps the ultimate validation of his vision.

Meanwhile, Robert's older son, Michael, and later Tim joined the family company and unwittingly replayed the rivalry between their father and his brother. The Mondavi family feuding seems worthy of feature-length treatment by their neighbor Francis Ford Coppola. Fair-haired Tim, who appears to have gotten most of his mother's Irish genes, seems more introverted than his older brother, who looks like a taller version of their father and projects an air of confident urbanity. Although Michael was briefly involved in winemaking at the Robert Mondavi winery, he soon moved to the marketing side of the company, while Tim eventually took charge of the cellar and the vineyards. When I first met them in the 1990s, introduced to each in turn by their father, I found the stylistic contrast extreme; bearded, taciturn Tim in jeans, not easy to talk to, absorbed in a blending session, putting me in mind of the Beat poet Gary Snyder; Michael in his minimalist office wearing a well-tailored suit with slicked-back hair, shaking my hand while fast-talking on the telephone. These were fleeting impressions: In those days their gregarious dad was the public face of the winery, and tended to keep the spotlight trained firmly on himself.



For many years the wines made at the Oakville estate, in particular the Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, set a new standard of excellence—the 1971, '74 and '78 established benchmarks—but in the '80s the firm expanded beyond Napa to produce lower-price wines from Lodi and elsewhere. According to Julia Flynn Siler, author of "The House of Mondavi," "Timothy, whose vision was to produce high-end, technically perfect wines for

connoisseurs, inevitably ended up on the opposite side of the argument from Michael, who pushed for sales growth and who enjoyed deal making and transactions of various sorts.”

The rapid expansion, and the need to replant the vineyards after phylloxera hit the Valley in the early 1990s, led Robert to go public in 1993 to raise cash. That move would ultimately lead to the Constellation takeover in 2004 and the loss of control of the family winery, presumably somewhat ameliorated by very large paydays for family members, including Tim.



Erin Kunkel for The Wall Street Journal

Tim Mondavi walking the vineyards at Continuum Estate in St. Helena, CA

When he started to look for vineyards to begin his new venture, Tim hoped to secure part of the historic To Kalon vineyard, on the valley floor, the heart and soul of Mondavi’s reserve Cab, but ultimately decided to look to the hills. In the early days of Napa viticulture, farming the rocky, hard-to-work hillsides would not have been economically feasible—one reason that the old guard settled on the valley floor. But students of European viticulture know that many of the greatest wines come from hillside vineyards. *Bacchus amat colles* was a Roman maxim meaning “Bacchus loves the hills.”

Back in the ‘90s, while the Robert Mondavi winery was having an identity crisis on the valley floor, there were guerrillas in the hills, ambitious upstarts inspired by its success. The most successful of these became known as cult Cabernets, small production wines like Harlan, Colgin, Bryant Family and Screaming Eagle that often pushed the envelope of ripeness and power to new extremes, inspiring raptures from the critics. It seems slightly ironic that Tim moved to the hills for his new

venture, although he points out a form of geographical continuity: “If you draw a line from the tower of Robert Mondavi winery, east southeast through the crown of Opus One and go up the eastern side of the valley, you’ll end up right here at the Continuum vineyard on Pritchard Hill.” Certainly the company is illustrious: Cults Bryant Family and Colgin, as well as the venerable Chappellet, are nearby, as well as Dalla Valle, early advocates of Cabernet Franc, a particular favorite of Tim’s. From its first vintage, Continuum has been composed of a relatively large percentage of Cabernet Franc. Tim is a fan of the Merlot- and Cab Franc-based wines of the Right Bank of Bordeaux, inevitably softer and more supple than the Cabernet Sauvignon-centric, Left Bank Médoc wines, and eventually intends to include more Merlot in the blend when his Pritchard Hill Merlot vines mature.

“Tim’s wines have always been texturally driven, with silky tannins,” says his devoted sister, Marcia, who raised her own family in New York, far from the family sturm und drang in Oakville, and seems very protective of her younger brother, sometimes jumping in to complete a thought when he pauses.

The early vintages of Continuum included grapes sourced from a lifetime of contacts in the valley, but by 2009 were 80% from the maturing vines of Pritchard Hill. Even with different grape sourcing, the five vintages I tasted over dinner with Tim, Marcia and Tim’s daughter Carissa certainly bear a strong stylistic resemblance. They are softer and silkier than a typical Napa Cab, but riper and more concentrated than the wines he made at Mondavi in the 1990s. “Opus One and Mondavi Reserve were more Médoc-influenced than Continuum,” he says. Continuum strikes a nice balance between the old-school Napa and the cult styles. Right now, the 2007 in particular is a real knockout.

Tim professes to be at peace with his brother, who makes a small production hillside Cabernet from a vineyard down the road on Atlas Peak; unlike Tim, who makes just one premium wine, the expansive Michael produces wine under five other labels, at different price points, and also runs an import business. Tim points out that they still share a driveway. Continuum seems to be precisely what Tim wanted all along—the realization of his father’s dream, which the family almost lost sight of along the way, to create a Napa Valley red that could stand alongside the best of the Old World.

OENOFILE: TIM MONDAVI PICKS

Two of Continuum's recent wines



2008 CONTINUUM

Another winner, this is a complex blend of 71% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Cabernet Franc, 7% Petit Verdot and 5% Merlot. The supple tannins make this approachable now through it will unfold and improve for years. \$165

2009 CONTINUUM

More delicate and refined than the '08 though no less complex, with hints of chocolate and coffee, this is one of the prettiest young Cabs (77% Cabernet Sauvignon) I've ever tasted. It's hard to resist now. \$165

