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The Mondavi legacy continues

Grandson talks about Continuum, the future and what he learned from his family of winemakers

by Bill Daley

Mondavi has been a name to know in California wine since the early 1920s, when patriarch Cesare Mondavi moved from Minnesota to Lodi and began buying, selling and shipping grapes around the country. Today, his descendants are working on various ventures that should keep the name Mondavi and wine synonymous well into the 21st century.

Take Tim Mondavi, Cesare's grandson. He and his sister, Marcia Mondavi Borger, are the forces behind Continuum Estate, a small artisan winery in Napa Valley. Their sole product is a pricey red blend of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and petit verdot. The wine has won consistent praise from critics and consumers since its release in 2008.

Tim's father was Robert Mondavi, arguably the country's most well-known winemaker after the Gallo brothers. Robert Mondavi died in 2008 at 94, almost four years after the sale of his eponymous winery to Constellation Brands. After overseeing winemaking operations at his father's winery for 30 years, Tim bounced back quickly after the sale. He and his sister launched Continuum Estate in 2005, with their father and their families. In 2008, the Mondavis acquired acreage on Pritchard Hill in St. Helena, Calif., to serve as the permanent home for Continuum Estate.

In an e-mail exchange, Tim Mondavi talks about the winery, its future and the legacy of the Mondavi name.

Q: Continuum is now 5 years old. What have been the biggest challenges you've faced? Has the sour economy had a huge impact?

A: The biggest challenge that we've faced was to secure a site that has world-class winegrowing potential. In the past at Robert Mondavi, I've been privileged to work with our own great properties and with partners who have also had fabulous sites. Given our goal of producing a single wine at the very highest level, selecting a site that could support that ambition was the biggest challenge.

The sour economy has had both positive and negative impacts. The positive impact is that the properties on Pritchard Hill may not have been available in a market that was easier for wine sales. The former owners felt my family and I, by virtue of our long history in and passion for wine, would be able to make our way in this difficult economy better than they. The negative side of the sour economy is that we worried more about the reception of our new baby. There is no guarantee of success for anyone. We are working harder in the marketplace telling our story firsthand. We have had a very heartwarming response.

Q: Continuum Estate focuses on one product: a red wine. Why? Do you foresee any future expansion of your line?

A: We are focusing on one wine for two reasons: quality of our wine and

clarity of our message. The singularity of our focus allows us to delve more deeply into growing and making a better wine. We can assure tremendous care in the vineyards, in the cellar and in the marketplace. As to your question about seeing any future expansion of our line? No, not in the foreseeable future. The only expansion we see is in our deeper understanding of our property and, as a result, the greater quality of our wine.

Q: Four generations of your family have been or are currently working in wine. What lessons have you received from each generation, including your kids?

A: To my grandfather, Cesare, I would attribute a sense of discovery and bravery. He discovered for our family the New World, brought us into wine in California and established a reputation of honesty and integrity. For my father, Robert, it was his commitment to excellence and his ability to energize the world about wine's importance. At this point, we at Continuum are all committed to carrying on these family traditions with absolute clarity of focus. Speaking for my sister and me, we are delighted to say as my father once said, "The next generation also has that bug."

Q: How has your father's reputation, his legacy, affected you? What have you done to set yourself apart? What areas have you been content to follow along your father's path?



Continuum Estate Looking southeast towards Yountville.

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A: I certainly share in my father's passion for wine, and as the winemaker for Robert Mondavi Winery for 30 years, I led the winery inquiries as to how to make great wine tick. I have been fortunate to work alongside some of the greatest winemakers in the world. It has given me a deep understanding of wine firsthand.

We have singularity of purpose with Continuum. (It) will be different from past projects because we are committed to optimizing this small estate and aspire to be a first growth in America.

More on the Mondavis

Couldn't fit all of my questions or Tim Mondavi's answers into my Uncorked column today, "The Mondavi legacy continues." So, here's some more info on him and his family.

Mondavi, right, is son of the late Robert Mondavi, whose eponymous winery achieved international renown, and grandson of the Cesare Mondavi, the patriarch who moved his family from Minnesota to California for a life in wine. Robert Mondavi's winery was sold to Constellation Brands in 2004. The next year, he joined Tim and his daughter, Marcia Mondavi Borger, as they started their own winery, Continuum Estate.

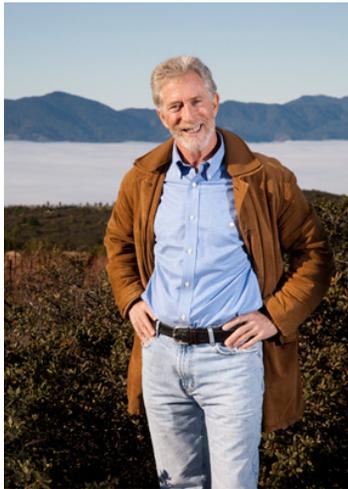


Photo: Jason Tinacci

Continuum's proprietary red wine had earned raves since its first release in 2008. The quality is what you'd expect from Tim Mondavi, who calls himself a "wine grower" instead of a "wine maker." Why?

"Artistic wine is grown, not made," he told me in our e-mail exchange.

A big milestone for the young winery was the 2008 purchase of vineyard acreage atop Pritchard Hill in the Napa Valley. I asked Tim how this buy would impact Continuum and its future development. Just as important, how would the wine change?

"Having a fabulous vineyard and a reliable source of great quality fruit allows us both to enhance our quality and have a greater ability to plan our future," he wrote. "The confidence and joy that comes from that is immeasurable. I've never been happier in my life. The wines will be different by virtue of our new site being of red rocky volcanic soil, roughly three feet deep (quite deep for mountain side vineyards) and of course higher elevations with a westerly exposure. This will affect the vines by yielding about half as much fruit, more concentration, and deeper berry flavors than before. I believe our wines will have greater depth and interest, and greater potential for longer term expression of elegance. Our wine making has always emphasized complex refined tannins, and this will be even more possible in the future as a result of this vineyard."

Tim and Marcia are of the third generation of Mondavis in wine. Already, the fourth is getting active in the family business. Tim's daughter, Carissa, is director of hospitality at Continuum, Carlo is West Coast sales manager, Dante works at the winery and Chiara is artist-in-residence and the designer of Continuum's distinctive label. Brian Borger, Marcia's son, is working the harvest. What does he hope his children learn from wine and the wine business?

"Wine is a great teacher," Tim wrote. "It teaches patience and the importance of a long term perspective. It is the beverage of generosity with the purpose of bringing people together in health and happiness. It teaches commitment and the importance of people."

What makes him happiest about wine?

"Great wine nourishes the mind, body and spirit and is meant to be shared. Great wine can't help but bring a smile to people's lives," he wrote.

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