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Continuum Estate the latest Mondavi family twist

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Find the exact spot at Continuum Estate, Tim Mondavi's new wine project, and you can glimpse the entirety of the Mondavi family's Napa Valley history.

On a clear day high on Pritchard Hill above the Silverado Trail, it's possible to view the Mondavis' famed Oakville winery across the valley. Next to it lies the To Kalon Vineyard that helped spur their fame. Glancing north past St. Helena, you might spy the Charles Krug property, where the family established its Napa roots in 1943, decades before the infamous brotherly split that propelled Robert Mondavi, Tim's father, to seek his own fortune.



Photo: Adm Golub
Tim Mondavi and daughter Carissa stand in the vineyards of Continuum Estate, which he sees as a way of contributing to the Mondavi family legacy.

Now Tim is ready to show off his addition to the Mondavi legacy - one built on decades of work in the family business.

"We are betting on the fact that we know a little bit about what we're doing," says Tim, 59.

The Mondavis have been writing their next chapter for nearly six years, and Continuum is a major piece. After selling their winery in 2004 to Constellation Brands, the world's largest wine company, the Mondavis found themselves well compensated but little more than figureheads. As Tim puts it, "Everything went up in smoke."

Suddenly the first family of American wine had no winery to its name. Robert's sons, Tim and Michael, diverged to create their own endeavors.

Michael, always the consummate businessman, created Folio Fine Wine Partners, an effort that includes both his own California wines and a series of imports - a scale model of the diverse Robert Mondavi empire.

Tim, trained at UC Davis, was the winemaker of the two. His was a more constrained notion: to create a single-estate wine that cut none of the winemaking corners he had been forced to trim at his father's winery.

It would provide a continuity of the Mondavi legacy, with his father offering guidance and his kids lending a hand, just as Robert ushered him and Michael into the family business.

Hence the name: Continuum.

"We had not missed a vintage since 1919 as a family, and we wanted to carry that on," Tim says.

That meant something in the Cabernet realm, specifically from To Kalon, long the source of top Mondavi wines.

Soon after the sale, Tim got his sister Marcia Mondavi Borger as a partner, received his dad's blessing and began securing the large oak and concrete fermenters he had wanted at the Mondavi facility, an expense seen by some as an extravagance.

Determined to make wine again in 2005, Tim assumed that he could rely on To Kalon fruit - an informal part of the sale agreement.



Photo: Adm Golub
Tim Mondavi holds the \$140 per bottle Continuum 2007 blend.

Initially, grapes did come from To Kalon. But it became evident

its new owners wouldn't make the fruit available to him for much longer. Continuum's 2007 vintage was the last to include a majority of grapes from the site that helped seal the Mondavi reputation.

"The first three vintages are Dad's final ode to To Kalon," says Tim's daughter, Carissa Mondavi.

Splits in family

In the brothers' differing paths, and Tim's choices for Continuum, lie echoes of their sometimes dramatic splits running their family's empire under the careful watch - and active hand - of their father.

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“I think the great thing is, this has allowed each of us to focus on something where we get the maximum satisfaction,” says Michael Mondavi. “But I think we each excel in our own ways.”

Although the brothers briefly served as co-CEOs of the Mondavi winery, Tim’s role was clearly in the cellar and vineyards, while Michael’s was in the boardroom - a split underscored by Robert’s decision to end those co-equal roles in 1994, when the company went public and Robert installed Michael as sole CEO, with Tim as a managing director in charge of winegrowing.

There was also a gap in philosophy. If Michael felt the Mondavi name could bring cachet to lower-priced wines, Tim defended the top end, conducting sometimes costly winemaking trials. His work faced scrutiny in a public company guided by a board accountable to Wall Street.

“What gave focus to Robert Mondavi was my father’s singular focus on the wines, from the first day. That clarity dimmed as the company went public,” Tim says. “Continuum was born of the continuation of that clarity.”



Photo: Adm Golub
Tim and Carissa Mondavi drive through the vineyards.

A move east

Though the family’s legacy was established on Napa’s western valley floor, Tim looked east toward spots like Howell Mountain and Atlas Peak, and their less fertile soils.

Eventually, Pritchard Hill caught his eye. Mondavi knew the area was a tougher prospect than Oakville’s richer soils. Yields are scant - Continuum gets just under 2 tons of grapes per acre, perhaps half the valley average - so farming is expensive.

“If you are up here and you don’t have that expectation, you’re going to be out of business in a hurry,” Tim says.

He was taken by a parcel near the Chappellet winery owned by Leighton and Linda Taylor of the Cloud View label. They said no when Tim approached them in 2007, but they changed their minds just in time for Robert, then 94, to see Continuum’s eventual home before his death in May 2008. A few months later, on July 16 - the same day, Tim is fond of noting, that his father

broke ground on his winery in 1966 - 86 acres of land was in Mondavi hands.

It took a little more than a year to acquire a second parcel from Tim’s new next-door neighbor, Dick Martin, a Los Angeles architect who founded the Versant label. The two parcels, ranging from about 1,300 to 1,600 feet elevation, together formed 173 total acres of prime Napa ground - with 63 currently in vineyard, 21 newly planted by the Mondavis, farmed organically but not certified.

It’s a site with a track record; the first plantings came in 1991, with more in 1996 and 2004, providing ample fruit for Continuum, which Tim wants to cap at 5,000 cases - meaning a lot of fruit or wine will be sold off or turned into a potential second label.

It is also a precious neighborhood, a sort of Gold Coast for Napa with its high-dollar bottles and closed-door properties. The adjacent Chappellet property is noted for its Pritchard Hill Cabernet. And just as Robert Mondavi welcomed Donn and Molly Chappellet to the valley in the mid ‘60s, the Chappellets more recently welcomed Tim and his family to their part of Napa.

“We’re delighted it is them, because it could have been, who knows, any entity,” says Cyril Chappellet of Chappellet Winery, one of Donn and Molly’s sons. “It could have been one of the big behemoths that is publicly owned and has no feel for the valley.”



Photo: Adm Golub
A bottle of Tim Mondavi’s Continuum 2007 blend rest atop a rock wall on the Mondavi’s Continuum Estates Tuesday, October 26, 2010, San Francisco, Calif. Tim Mondavi, son of Robert Mondavi, has a new wine project, Continuum Estate, which he sees as a way of carrying on the family legacy.

Not far away is Bryant Family, one of Napa’s most visible 1990s cult projects, and Ovid, one of its most ambitious recent launches. Just downslope lie Dalla Valle’s vineyards, source of the lauded Maya blend.

Maya actually serves as a key reference for Continuum; both are based on a mix of Cabernet Sauvignon and a large portion of finicky, aromatic Cabernet Franc, which has found a lukewarm reception in Napa. But Tim was reminded of his experiences at Ornellaia, the Tuscan estate briefly owned by the Mondavi winery, and of his fondness for Bordeaux’s Right Bank.

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“I personally loved the wines that had the highest percentages of Cabernet Franc. So we reflected that,” he says. “It also had to be different from what we’d done before.”

Given the neighborhood, and the limited production of just 1,500 cases, Continuum is not cheap. But the 2007 sold out in three weeks at \$140 per bottle - about the cost of the Mondavi Reserve Cabernet, and well under the going rate for many neighbors, including Bryant Family, currently about \$325.

A different path

Tim, loquacious and displaying the artistic streak he was known for at Robert Mondavi, insists on driving up to the property’s high point to show off a favorite parcel of Cabernet Franc. He seems to feel relaxed here, pursuing the sort of winemaking he loves without the financial pressures that caused strife in Oakville.

The forthcoming 2008 vintage marks the Mondavis’ true break with To Kalon and the valley floor. It contains 70 percent fruit from Pritchard Hill; that jumps to 90 percent in the 2009.

The wines have been made at outsourced facilities, currently at the Ranch, a St. Helena custom-crush winery. But a home is coming. On a rise near that favored Cab Franc block, a facility designed by architect Howard Backen, built on pillars of rammed earth, is due by 2014.

Though Tim tapped some veteran non-family talent from the Mondavi realm - Greg Brady, Continuum’s general manager, was a senior vice president at the Mondavi winery - like most things Mondavi, Continuum is ultimately a family affair. Daughter Carissa does sales and communications. Son Dante has been working as a cellar master. Son Carlo, who previously founded a line of skin-care products, is in sales. Daughter Chiara painted the label design, a rendering of a Cabernet Franc vine.

Tim clearly sees that as the path to ensuring that the Mondavi legacy endures beyond his generation.

“I think the fact my family has been in the wine business since 1919 tilts things in our favor. And I think the fact we’re serious tilts things in our favor,” Tim says.

“It’ll be a while before we actually make money, but we know that.”

From the notebook

How is Continuum? It is a masterful work in progress - by design, clearly, because the vineyard source has been shifting. But the template remains largely the same: a big dose of Cabernet Sauvignon, a healthy addition of Cabernet Franc and a bit of Petit Verdot for structure and color.

The 2007 Continuum (\$140) comes primarily from the To Kalon site, with about 15 percent from the estate. At 60 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 22 percent Cabernet Franc and 18 percent Petit Verdot, it receives 100 percent new oak.

As a young wine, the wood is evident. It’s hefty, lavish and packed with graphite, black olive and peppery Franc aromatics, plus deep kirsch and black cherry - a more overt effort that wears the To Kalon signature of rich black fruit. That To Kalon mark often falls prey to a Napa tendency to take a good thing too far. Continuum takes it just far enough; it’s a well-executed powerhouse.

By contrast, the 2008 Continuum (\$150; to be released in March) is predominantly an estate effort, with 70 percent of the fruit from Pritchard Hill. The proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon rises to 71 percent and there’s a touch of Merlot, with a bit less new oak.

The result is far more perfumed and fresh, with smoked tobacco leaf and dried flower scents and bright huckleberry and cassis flavors. There’s a much purer fruit signature, with sinewy tannins and a dark-stone mineral presence that already shows tremendous potential to age. As a sign of the project’s future, it shows Tim Mondavi’s wisdom in moving across the valley and up to the hills.

- Jon Bonné

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