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Mondavi granddaughter part of the continuum

Anne Schamberg | On Wine

It's not often that I have the chance to say, "Reservation for Mondavi."

It was dinner at Harbor House on Milwaukee's lakeshore with Carissa Mondavi, 33-year old granddaughter of the late Robert Mondavi.

Tim is her father, and he was winemaker from 1974 to 2004, when the iconic winery in the Napa Valley was sold under not the happiest circumstances to Constellation Brands.

So this woman grew up right in the thick of things.

As she remembers it: "We were encouraged to pursue our passions, whatever they were. But as my grandfather would say - I think you'll find you can always be passionate about food and wine."



Photo: Benny Sieu

Carissa Mondavi is the granddaughter of winemaker Robert Mondavi. She is helping launch a new brand, Continuum.

His vision, according to Carissa, "was about putting wine squarely on the American table and elevating California wine to the world stage."

If you have followed this family's saga, you won't be surprised to hear that the cosseted wine we were drinking that evening was the 2007 Continuum, a super-premium Cabernet blend.

The brand was launched in 2005 by Tim Mondavi and his sister Marcia Mondavi Borger with help from their respective children.

Carissa was in town to get the word out about this ruby-colored gem, which will knock you back about \$140 a bottle in a wine shop.

It's beautifully concentrated, with a rich, supple texture that she describes as a hallmark of her father Tim's winemaking style. If you follow the numbers, it earned a 97 from the Wine Spectator.

"We are committed to making a wine that can stand in the company of the great wines of the world," she offered when asked about the steep price. "That's the tier we're interested in being recognized in."

She is particularly proud of her father, with his "absolute clarity of focus on this one wine."

But let's back up. In 2004, the publically held, financially struggling Mondavi winery was sold to Constellation Brands, a wine, beer and spirits conglomerate. The family is no longer connected to the company that bears their name.

And, yes, Carissa's dad is "a little bit black and blue from what happened."

Her father had long believed that as the winery grew in size "there were too many different entities, too many different wines, too many different labels" to stay competitive. "He railed against that for years, to no effect."

After the business was sold, Michael Mondavi, Tim's brother, established Folio Fine Wine Partners, a purveyor and producer in the Napa Valley.

Tim and Marcia, along with Robert and his wife, Margrit, rebounded about a year later by starting Continuum, a winery that sits on the rocky soil of Pritchard Hill on the eastern ridge above St. Helena, Calif.

Once again, it's the land of opportunity.

"That's what I love about America," Carissa said. "Even having gone public and lost our company, I could never begrudge that."

Facing difficulty is "part of how you reinvent yourself. If you have the drive to realize something - and a path and a commitment - then in this country you can do it."

For her, "the name Continuum has so much significance. It's the continuity of the vines from year to year and the continuity of wine being on the table since the beginning of civilized man."

Closer to her heart, it's the continuation - and rebirth - of the family's generations-long involvement in the wine business,

CONTINUUM



which began when her great-grandparents immigrated to the United States from Italy in the early 1900s.

Continuum is a work in progress. The goal is to have about 60 acres of vineyards, from which they will produce about 5,000 cases of what she calls “terroir-drive, estate-based wine.”

With the 2007 vintage, about 15% of the grapes are from their own vineyards. The rest of the fruit is sourced from top-quality locations nearby.

Robert Mondavi died in 2008 at the age of 94, but he lived long enough to see the property before he passed away.

“He had such strong determination - I feel like he was holding on,” Carissa said. “It was so important to show him that we were carrying on, carrying it forward.”

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