

Mondavi finds light at new Continuum Estate

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Marcia Mondavi Borger and Tim Mondavi have built a new winery at Continuum Estate on Pritchard Hill. The winery is fronted by "Robert's Wood," a planting of 100-year-old olive trees in memory of their father, Robert Mondavi, who was a partner in the Continuum Estate project.

Wineries have a well-deserved reputation for being dark, dank and mysterious. Yet, when one particular winemaker began to dream of his ideal winery, one of the most important elements that he said came to mind was "light."

"I think light is very important in a winery," said Tim Mondavi at the newly built Continuum Estate facility atop Pritchard Hill. "And natural light is the best."

Continuum Estate is located on 173 acres at the top of Pritchard Hill. To get to it you must drive slowly up the winding track of Sage Canyon Road, through numerous glades and copses, past irrigation ponds, following small golden lettered signs in Times Roman labeled "Continuum," until a sweeping vista opens up at the top of the world. Here, at elevations between 1,325 and 1,600 feet, the quality of the light is translucent, with panoramas facing south toward San Francisco and west into the Napa Valley. It's no wonder that Mondavi hoped to bring this light into the center of the winery's operating hub.

And yet, searching for the winery itself is a bit of a challenge. The 62 acres of planted vineyards sweep away from the small estate house, but there is no immediate sign of any winery building itself. That's because, according to Tim Mondavi and his sister Marcia Mondavi Borger, they didn't want to interrupt the breathtaking views with an ostentatious building. Instead they chose a design by architect Howard Backen to work in harmony with the land itself.

The building, in earth tones matching the ocher, browns and reds of the rocky, volcanic soils, literally "nestles" into the hillside. As you descend toward the winery — still under construction — the front is concealed by a small grove of olive trees.

"This is Robert's Wood," said Tim. "We planted 100-year-old olive trees, in memory of my father, who would have been 100 years old last year."

The construction of this winery began in 2010 with the goal of having the 2013 crush managed within its walls in commemoration of Robert Mondavi's 100th birthday. The results are meticulous and spectacular. Robert Mondavi, Marcia said, was more than an inspiration for this estate. He was a real partner. Before he passed away in 2008, he was brought up to this parcel of land just as Tim and Marcia were seeking a new home for the family's winemaking.

"He wasn't able to speak at that point, but he made us understand that he was pleased," Tim said. And so the three of them, Robert, Tim and Marcia, purchased the land and began again, in Continuum. "You see,"



Marcia said, “when the Robert Mondavi Winery was purchased by Constellation Brands, we didn’t want it to happen. But when it did happen — suddenly — for the first time, we had no vines of our own. It was a sad time for us, as a family.” The creation of the Continuum Estate label, Marcia said — with the ongoing construction of the winery — is Tim and Marcia’s new beginning for the next winemaking generation of Mondavi children.

The winery itself is divided into four separate areas, accessed from a central dais, lit with ample natural light from the skylights above. All fruit from the vineyards, Tim said, is selectively hand-harvested into small lug-boxes, and brought into this central area, where it is sorted before and after de-stemming, and then gravity-fed into a combination of specially designed small French oak and cement tanks. A small amount also goes to French oak barrels for fermentation.

There are 36 main fermenters, one for each of the 36 vineyard blocks of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, petit verdot and merlot. Fermentation vessels are a combination of Taransaud and Francois Foudrie oak, and Sonoma Cast Stone and Nomblot concrete vessels. About 10 percent is fermented in oak barrels. All wood and concrete fermentation tanks are equipped with automated pump-over air pumps and temperature control sensors to ensure a gentle and timely extraction. This capability allows each lot to be handled independently.

The winery’s design incorporates water conservation protocols that allow the winery to be 100 percent water self-sufficient. It also reduces energy requirements for heating through the use of solar thermal panels. In addition, carbon dioxide produced during fermentation is evacuated to allow for more efficient heating and cooling. Finally, extra-heavy insulation throughout provides temperature and humidity control.

“The goal is to produce a single estate wine to be recognized among the finest in the world,” Tim said. “We are making one wine, on one estate, by one family.” And, indeed, the partnership of Tim and Marcia has become a dedicated enterprise for the fourth generation of Mondavi children. Daughter Carissa Mondavi handles communications, hospitality and marketing. Her brother Carlo oversees all markets west of the Mississippi while brother Dante is director of East Coast sales. Finally, sister Chiara works on both the vineyard and winery teams. Everything at Continuum is about family and focused on the vineyards for the creation of what Tim calls “a true world-class wine.”

“We believe the great wines of the world faithfully reflect their sites,” Tim wrote in his blog. Overlooking the vineyards, as he and Marcia described the various blocks on the map, he meticulously explained how the estate has two distinct soil types: Rock-Hambright loam and Sobrante loam. Both sets of soil, Tim said, are a mix of clay loam, fractured volcanic material and immense quantities of andesite rock.

“Down in the valley, you have loam that runs 30 feet deep, and it gives those grapes a deep, vibrant and earthy quality,” he said. “But up here, there’s only 3 feet of earth, and that stresses the vines. And that stress adds a unique character to the flavor of the grapes. The vines have to work harder, but it allows the quality of the environment to be reflected in the grapes and to come through in the wine.”

“We’re up here above the fog line,” Mondavi said. “We’re 10 degrees cooler in the summer, and 10 degrees warmer in the winter.”

Likewise, in the incredibly translucent light, as Tim and Marcia point out the old Robert Mondavi Winery in the valley below, there was a feeling that — borne of the many stresses over years of family conflict and disappointment — something is indeed fashioning a new vintage of Mondavi. And in that light high above the Napa Valley, its importance will be in Continuum.

