

The *Decanter* interview

Tim Mondavi

After the sale of Robert Mondavi Winery, Robert's son Tim could have gone anywhere. But with his love of terroir, he chose to stick close to home, as he tells Adam Lechmere

AN OLD MAXIM goes that if you want know what someone's really like, you should ask their employees. The same goes for their children, so I was pleased to find Tim Mondavi had invited most of his family along when he asked me to dine at his hilltop house in Stags Leap District. Continuum, Mondavi's new venture, is a family affair.

His children Carlo, Dante and Carissa, all aged in their 20s, run East Coast sales, West Coast sales, and PR and events respectively. Another daughter, Chiara, who's not here for dinner, is a viticultural researcher and an artist (she designed the Continuum label). Another son, Dominic, isn't involved. They're a friendly bunch, and they treat their father with an affectionate, slightly amused respect that would deflate any pomposity very quickly. Not that Mondavi is pompous. There's a shyness about him that is sometimes mistaken for standoffishness, and an old-fashioned courtesy.

During a morning of interviews and tastings he's forthcoming and open, and then on home ground he's a charming host. The first thing he suggests is having a look in the cellar, and all of us clomp down the stairs and spend a happy 10 minutes loose in Aladdin's cave. In the end we plump for a 1974, 1980 and 1997 Robert Mondavi Winery Reserve Cabernet, a 1979 Opus One, then a Continuum vertical from 2005 to 2010.

Continuum was set up in 2005, a partnership between Tim Mondavi, his father Robert and sister Marcia, who lives in New York. At first the wine – there's only one, a Bordeaux blend – was made with grapes sourced from the famous To Kalon vineyard on a deal 'sealed with a handshake between Tim and Richard Sands', the boss of Constellation Wines, which had bought Robert Mondavi Winery the year before. Then they found the site on Pritchard Hill, 16.6ha of Cabernet Sauvignon (about half the plantings), Cabernet Franc (a third), then smaller

parcels of Petit Verdot and Merlot, planted 18 years before by a marine biologist named Leighton Taylor.

Gradually, Mondavi has increased the proportion of grapes from here; the 2012 Continuum will come entirely from Pritchard Hill, and he intends to plant what fallow land he has, bringing the total area under vine to 60ha. It's very much a work in progress. There's a handsome modern house, caves are being dug out and a winery is being built by the celebrated architect Howard Backen, who is responsible for the Harlan winery as well as buildings for Apple and Robert Redford's Sundance Institute.

The sweet spot

This part of Napa (it's not an appellation, the wines are AVA Napa Valley) is one of the most talked-about sub-regions in the valley, the envy of covetous winemakers the world over, searching for higher vineyards. It avoids the temperature extremes of the valley floor so is cooler in summer and warmer in winter. 'It's a sweet spot for photosynthesis of the vine,' as Mondavi puts it.

His vineyards stand at 400m to 500m, with red, rocky volcanic soil going to depths of no more than a metre. There are boulders as big as truck wheels dotted around – Ann Colgin, whose vineyards are a stone's throw away, had to dynamite her land to plant. Yields are tiny, an average 24 hectolitres per hectare, producing 2,700 cases in 2010. This is exclusive stuff: priced at \$175 (£107) a bottle, Mondavi is placing Continuum in the higher reaches of fine Napa Cabernet.

It's been a long journey. Tim and his brother Michael were involved in their father Robert's grand project from the earliest age: Tim was making wine at Robert Mondavi Winery in the 1970s, and was director of winemaking until his resignation in 2004. That was soon after the forced resignation >

Photographs: Tim Mondavi was photographed exclusively for *Decanter* by Clay McLachlan/claypix.com at Continuum, California

Mondavi at a glance

Born April 11, 1951

Education University of California at Davis (Viticulture & Oenology)

Career 2005: Founded Continuum Estate with his father Robert and sister Marcia to create an estate making a single world-class wine. 1976–2004: Director of winemaking for Robert Mondavi Winery, producing wine in California, France, Italy, Chile and Australia, including Opus One, Luce, Seña and Tenuta Ornellaia.

Family Lives in Napa Valley, the father of five children: Carissa, Chiara, Carlo, Dominic and Dante

Hobbies Swimming, skiing, diving, biking and travelling to other wine regions



of Michael, former chief executive and chairman of the board, during that period of uncertainty and internecine squabbling which culminated in the sale of RMW to Constellation and the family's loss of control of the winery.

After the sale, with Robert remaining as ambassador and keeping his office at the winery (his widow Margrit still occupies it), the brothers went down different paths. Michael started up an import company, Folio Wine Partners (see box p28), and Tim – after a ‘sabbatical’ that had tongues wagging in the wine world (the received wisdom was that he was on retreat, traumatised by the convulsions in the company) – set about continuing the work his father, and grandfather, had started.

His says his purpose is to make Continuum ‘recognised among the best wines in the world’. It ‘represents a continuation of the best that my family has stood for. No one knows the name of

‘There’s a shyness about Tim that is sometimes mistaken for standoffishness, and an old-fashioned courtesy’

Cesare Mondavi [Robert’s father] but he was well respected and really innovative in his day. He discovered the land [Cesare moved the family from Minnesota to Lodi and eventually bought the Charles Krug winery]. Then my father took it to a narrower frame and now this generation is taking it narrower still.’

Realising the dream

He has illustrious neighbours – from where we stand we can see the vineyards of Chappellet, Bryant, Colgin, Dalla Valle – but, he says, ‘This is the best position. This is one of the most gifted sites in Napa. This the best site I’ve worked with, better than To Kalon, better than Ornellaia even.’

Mondavi is convinced this ‘sweet spot’ is where he can realise his dream of creating a ‘clear Napa Valley wine’, as he puts it. ‘Up here we’ve come to the pinnacle of the ultimate of quality potential: a single wine dedicated to understanding a single great estate. That’s what great wines are.’

He feels that the 2010 Continuum, born of a cold, late, wet vintage, ‘has the potential to be the best I have made’. It is subdued on the nose, while the tannins are insistent and precise, the fruit dense, rich and perfumed, the acidity fresh.

The wines are cool-fermented, with extended warm maceration, with the wine drained into barrel with the lees (‘I love lees,’ Mondavi says). The grapes at this elevation are thick-skinned, and extraction is as gentle as possible. Mondavi, dedicated to terroir as he is, is dropping the amount of new French oak as more Pritchard Hill fruit goes into the wine, ‘to allow the site to show through’.

As the proportion of mountain fruit increases, so there are subtle changes in the wines’ profiles. The 2005 and 2006, made with more than 80%



To Kalon grapes, have bright, savoury aromas and vibrant damson and cherry fruit. By the time we get to the 2008, the first true mountain wine, with Cabernet Sauvignon from Pritchard Hill and Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot from Diamond Mountain to the north, the softness of the fruit is tempered by fresher acidity and grippier tannins. ‘The mountain fruit adds power,’ Mondavi says. He’s particularly excited by the Cabernet Franc, which he intends to make up 25% of the wine as the vines mature. ‘It’s supremely fine, very aromatic, with a lovely silky texture and an exotic finish.’

Mondavi is soft-spoken, eloquent, and he has an evangelical glint in his eye: he gives the distinct impression that he is standing on this ground for a reason. ‘I will not allow anything to get in the way of our purpose,’ he tells me, and I see the pioneer ➤

Above: the softly spoken Tim Mondavi shares the pioneering grit and passion for the land that runs in his famous family



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Tim Mondavi on the Pritchard Hill vineyard (pictured above)

grit that runs in the family – and even a touch of the zealot. If his beard was any bushier he’d look like an Old Testament prophet.

No place like home

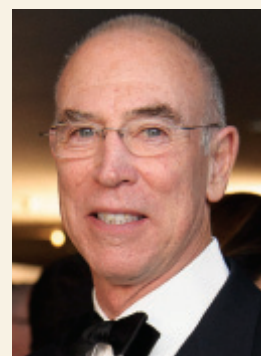
Robert Mondavi was another evangelist, with a character that some described as overbearing – Michael Mondavi has spoken of the need to escape his father’s ‘shadow’. Was that Tim’s experience? He nods vigorously, then says, ‘For me it wasn’t a shadow, it was a light. His passion for discovery and his passion for excellence was something I was always close to, and I’m still doing that. But you have to figure out what’s appropriate for the day, and what gets your own juices going.’

I take him to mean that he’s continuing his father’s work, but in his own way. This is the narrower focus he was talking about. Cesare went from selling Lodi grapes to making wine at Charles Krug; Robert started the search for finesse and true reflection of site at Oakville; Tim takes his quest into the hills. ‘It’s the same story but on an increasingly focused base,’ he says.

There’s also a sense that he’s come to rest after the convulsions of the past decade. All the family members must have won handsomely from the \$1.3bn sale of Robert Mondavi Winery, so they could afford to look around them, and it took Tim a while to alight on Pritchard Hill. ‘I could have gone

Michael Mondavi

Michael Mondavi, Tim’s elder brother, founded Robert Mondavi Winery with his father in 1966, and remained there as CEO and later chairman until his forced resignation in 2004, just before Constellation bought the company. Losing control of the family winery was not so much traumatic as ‘disappointing’, he now says. He quickly found his feet in launching Folio Wine Partners, which now imports some 500,000 cases of exclusively family-owned wines from Italy (with Frescobaldi in pride of place), Germany, Spain and Austria. He also makes his own wines – including the flagship M, from a vineyard high on Atlas Peak – along with his wife Isabel, son Rob and daughter Dina: the children own a majority share in the company. Leaving the corporation that RMW had become was ‘a renaissance. I hadn’t had the luxury of walking the vineyards for years, because I was running the company and dealing with financial analysts who didn’t care if it was Cheerios or toilet paper we were dealing with.’ Now, he says, ‘We’re having a ball, doing the things we love.’



Photograph: Nick Harvey/WireImage/Getty Images

anywhere,’ he says. At first he thought of Sonoma, the western slopes of the Mayacamas range – ‘wonderful red rocky volcanic soil. It’s under-recognised and I thought I could bring a bit of light to the region’ (that evangelical streak again), then he thought he might make a coastal Pinot Noir. Eventually he decided to stay closer to home.

So here he is, perched on his gifted site. Everything would seem to be in place. Does he feel at rest? ‘Oh yes. I won’t rule out expansion, but not in the near future. We haven’t finished the winery yet, or the caves. Before I do anything else, I want to see Continuum take its place on the world stage. I believe that excellence comes from consistent determination to a single purpose.’ **D**

Former editor of Decanter.com, Adam Lechmere is a freelance journalist