

MONDAVIS RISE AGAIN WITH CONTINUUM

Family brings wine operation to Pritchard Hill

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In less than a decade, Tim and Marcia Mondavi have gone from the low of losing their far-famed, family-built wine business to the high of having a hot new brand making waves in the world of wine.

Consumers who still enjoy the wines from Robert Mondavi Winery are well aware that the family patriarch and his children never intended to part with their Oakville landmark. But when the company went public and control wound up in the hands of those with no skin in the game, the winery and its holdings suddenly had new owners.

That sale to Constellation Brands in 2004, however, did allow Robert Mondavi and his children to start new ventures in the business they knew so well.

Robert teamed up with Tim and Marcia to launch Continuum Estate in 2005. Son Michael made a fresh start with a new Carneros wine operation offering several new brands and importing prestige labels from Europe.

The Mondavi family has been making wine in the United States every grape harvest since 1919, Tim proudly points out.

His grandfather, Cesare, a native of Sassoferrato in the Le Marche region of Italy, started making wine and shipping grapes to fellow countrymen when he and his wife, Rosa, operated a boardinghouse for Minnesota miners in the early part of the 20th century.

“Cesare saw the future in table wine (after coming to California to purchase grapes),” Tim said. “He told my dad, ‘Bobby, go to the Napa Valley’ ... and he did. Post-Prohibition America was still in love (with) fortified

wine and it was mostly immigrants who drank wine with their meals. Those who did mostly drank what was imported from France and Germany.

“My father believed that we could do as well as the Europeans did ... and he said that we could go beyond what people thought of us (as winemakers). He proved that, and then did it for food as well as wine. He knew great food as our grandmother was a gifted cook from Sassoferrato. That’s dad’s legacy ... we are honoring his legacy here on Pritchard Hill.”

At elevations between 1,300 and 1,600 feet, Continuum Estate has been carved out of a rocky, windswept mountain now widely respected as prime vineyard land. It boasts sweeping views of Lake Hennessey to the north and the fertile Napa Valley to the west and south.



Cabernet sauvignon vines await harvest at Continuum Estate at the top of Pritchard Hill, located well above the valley’s fog line. Submitted photo.

There are 173 acres of Continuum, with 62 of them devoted to vineyard, although 5 lie fallow at the moment. The majority of the vines were planted in 1996, with a few dating to 1991, and more recent plantings occurring in 2004, 2010 and earlier this year.

Tim reveals he actually put two parcels together in 2008 to make up the current Continuum Estate. “I had them recorded on Marcia’s birthday, which is July 16 ... the same day dad broke ground on the Robert Mondavi Winery (in the mid-’60s). I was able to show dad this property a month before he passed away.”

One of the parcels was owned by Linda and Leighton Taylor, a marine biologist at the University of Hawaii and author. The Taylors not only grew grapes, they also had their own wine brands, Cloudview and Silver Lining.

The upper piece of Continuum land was owned by architect Dick Martin. He also had planted a portion of the property to grapes and had a small wine brand, Versant.

Due to what Tim calls “shy soils” — that’s an average of 3, but no more than 4, feet of top soil — the vines produce “much lower yields” than what one might find on the valley floor. “Our yields average between 1.6 and 2 tons an acre.

“Cabernet sauvignon makes up 55 percent of our plantings, with cabernet franc 25 percent, petit verdot 15 percent and merlot 5 percent. Vineyard spacing, rootstock and clonal selection match the specific needs of each 1-to-2-acre block.”

A longer, high-elevation growing season, warm days above the fog line, moderate nighttime temperatures and low vigor stony soils all combine to create an ideal setting for making an outstanding red wine.

FIRST ESTATE CRUSH

Now that Continuum Estate has a fully functional winery right where its grapes are grown, Tim and Marcia are breathing easier. A recent walk-through with harvest in full swing displayed a just-completed, state-of-the-art cellar that will be fully landscaped, polished and ready for public inspection come spring.



Overjoyed as the last of the winery’s fermentation tanks were installed, Continuum Estate’s winemaking and viticultural team includes, left to right, General Manager Greg Brady, partner Tim Mondavi and three of his five children — Dante, Carlo and Chiara. Submitted photo.

Tim and Marcia said their goal is to be the size of a small first-growth winery. “We’re half of that now,” said Tim, Continuum’s director of winemaking. “The winery is designed to capture all sections of the vineyard. There are 37 blocks of vines and there are 37 fermentation tanks — 75 percent are oak, the remainder cement. The mix will evolve as we better understand the vineyard.”

“In designing the winery, the goal was to build in flexibility to meet the needs of the vineyard,” Marcia adds.

“The vines love the property more than I do,” Tim continues.

“We are stepping ahead of the norm by focusing on the best. We are dedicated to one wine at the highest level. This is the first time a Mondavi wine is 100 percent estate-based.

“Continuum is family ... a continuation of the best of what our family has stood for.”

All of Tim’s children have been involved in Continuum wines. Daughter Carissa — whom dad calls the brand’s “best ambassador” — heads up the communications and hospitality effort. Her sister, Chiara, is responsible for the label artwork. She agreed to create a shadow painting of a cabernet franc leaf patterned after some of the paintings in her father’s home. “She selected the cabernet franc because she knew that grape variety plays an important part in the blends of Continuum,” sister Carissa notes. Chiara is also studying viticulture and enology at present and is working in the vineyards.

Son Carlo is director of West Coast sales and brother Dante — who served as cellar master for years — is also in sales now, both working with sales director Stu Harrison. Their brother, Dominic, a graphic artist, also helped with brand labels.

Additional members of the team include winemaker Kurt Niznik, assistant winemaker Carrie Findleton, vineyard supervisor Ryan Gerhardt and general manager Greg Brady.

“This has been a great education for me,” Carissa said. “I like that we’re shooting for the stars.”

Her father smiles and adds: “The greatest wines of the world are the result of a clarity of focus. I believe we have that ... it’s not our first rodeo, you know.”