



USA, California, Napa Valley: Continuum – A Complete Retrospective

LISA PERROTTI-BROWN

28th Feb 2019 | The Wine Advocate | *Issue 241 End of February 2019*

Continuum Estate and its Sage Mountain vineyard up on Pritchard Hill are truly a sight to behold. Just putting aside the jaw-dropping view from an altitude of around 1,500 feet overlooking Oakville, it is the sheer scale of the vineyard that is particularly impressive. Like his father—the late Robert Mondavi—Tim Mondavi clearly doesn't do things by halves.

Continuum has a substantial vineyard by Napa standards. Thus far, there are 62.85 acres planted to Continuum's Sage Mountain vineyard: 37.51 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, 15.07 acres of Cabernet Franc, 6.84 acres of Petit Verdot and 3.43 acres of Merlot, with another 4.07 acres of fallow/plantable land. Thirty-eight of these acres were planted in 1991 and 1996 and thus have a fair bit of vine age. The rest was planted in 2010. The vineyard is divided into small, one- to two-acre blocks of varying soil types, aspects and altitudes, planted to compatible clones and rootstocks and managed separately. The low-vigor, rocky soils keep average yields low, at around 1.8 tons per acre, though some vintages, such as 2015, have been as painfully small as half a ton to the acre.



Nestled up behind Colgin and Ovid, I don't need to tell readers that we're in the realm of *terroir* royalty at Continuum Estate. Like many areas of Pritchard Hill, there is certainly an element of restricted depth of soil here. In short, the land is pretty much all rocks. Driving along the edge of Continuum's vineyard, the "string of pearls"—as Tim has named a long, arcing line of brick-red boulders along the perimeter—is something to marvel at in itself. A few of the largest boulders simply had to be left in the vineyard and worked around. Also worth noting is how the low-vigor soils here are set apart by their relatively high mineral content, including a fair bit of iron ore, which is visible not just in the red hue of the dirt but in the outcroppings of rocks throughout the area streaked with rust-colored iron oxide.

I recently had the good fortune to taste a complete retrospective of the flagship wine with Tim Mondavi and his daughter Carissa. In fact, I took the opportunity to return for a second visit a couple of months later, in order to taste the 2016s in bottle and the nascent 2017s and 2018s from barrel. I also wanted to get a clearer understanding of this truly distinctive location in Napa.

"Mountain fruit has more layers than the valley floor," commented Tim Mondavi as we sat down to taste. While I'm not sure I agree with him on this point, I can concur that a lot of mountain fruit—and particularly that of Pritchard Hill—displays clearer delineation of aroma and flavor compounds, mainly because their spectrum tends to be broader. Considering just the fruit profile (i.e., not the aspects of spice, herbal, mineral or savory, etc.) and putting vintage variation aside, the characters of this area tend to run the whole gamut of red, blue and black fruits, whereas areas of the valley floor may be equally complex but more focused on the blue and black fruit spectrums, and so the layers are perhaps not quite so well defined.



Readers should note that the first three vintages of Continuum—2005, 2006 and 2007—were mainly (85%) from the To Kalon vineyard. The 2008 vintage was 71% estate fruit. From 2010 all the fruit came from Pritchard Hill, although it was not yet all from the estate. In 2011, 98.5% came from Continuum’s estate vineyard and then from 2012 onward, the flagship wine was 100% estate grown.

“Our barrel aging is more Burgundian than Bordelaise,” Tim mentioned. “The wines age a long time on the lees.” Thus, while the wines spend a considerable amount of time in French oak barriques (approximately two-thirds new) at around 20-22 months, vibrancy of fruit is maintained via this extended time on the lees. This aspect is clearly evident in the style of the wines.

The last couple of vintages, 2015 and 2016, have seen a notable increase in the proportion of Cabernet Franc versus Cabernet Sauvignon. Previous vintages saw the blend containing around 60% to 80% Cabernet Sauvignon with 10% to 25% Cabernet Franc. In both 2015 and 2016, the blends are composed of 46% Cabernet Sauvignon and 31% Cabernet Franc, with the remaining proportion made up of Petit Verdot with a dollop of Merlot. This greater contribution from the Cabernet Franc seems to lend a compelling freshness to the otherwise rich, concentrated palate that does not come from acidity alone but from even more of that bright red fruit and dried herbs sparks—in essence maximizing the vineyard’s strengths. These vintages also seem decidedly savory rather than fruit-driven, even early on in their evolution.



"2016 was, relatively, a cooler year," said Tim. "There was a real freshness of climate." Like many of Napa's most successful 2016s that I have already rated, Tim and his team made the most of this vintage's signature "energy" in the wine. In my book, 2016 Continuum is the estate's most impressive offering yet. Here we really see the next-generation Mondavi family using their wealth of winemaking history and experience to home in on a vision for this remarkable location and execute with impressive precision, plus a good measure of dramatic flair. Bravo!

I tasted a few trial blends of the 2017 vintage, but since they weren't finished blends, I haven't reviewed them. I can say that the 2017s I've tasted have fantastic vibrancy, great mid-palate intensity and loads of pretty, perfumed red fruits with satiny tannins. Very promising! Even more exciting were the 2018 lots that I also got to sample from barrel. Wow—talk about a vintage that really plays to that Pritchard Hill perfume, polish and precision! If the barrel samples are anything to go on, readers will want to leave room in their cellars for what's to come from this exciting new taste of Napa Valley.

Vintage	Wines	RP
2016	Continuum Proprietary Red	99
2013	Continuum Proprietary Red	98
2007	Continuum Proprietary Red	98
2015	Continuum Proprietary Red	97+
2014	Continuum Proprietary Red	97