

Continuum TIM MONDAVI

« ONE PURPOSE, ONE WINE,
ONE ESTATE, ONE FAMILY »

In 2004, the Mondavi's were losing their family winery, patiently built by California legend, Robert Mondavi. For Tim, his son, this was more than a slight injury. He had been winemaker and enologist at the Mondavi domaine for more than 30 years and couldn't envisage life without vineyards on the horizon. So, he began again, replanting his roots in the hills of Napa Valley. Continuum or the history of a second chance.

BY ORIANNE NOUAILHAC
PHOTOS STEVEN ROTHFELD

Tim
Mondavi
and his
daughter
Chiara.



Family Sunday lunch under the hundred-year old olive trees planted in tribute to Robert Mondavi.



The wine storehouse merged into nature, drawn by Harlan Estate's architect.

His face has changed very little despite the years and the challenges. His large white beard, which gives him the air of a wise vigneron, frames his passionate features, empathizing his every smile, expressing his every mood. Tim Mondavi is now a happy man. Resilient, he stood up to fate. Son of Robert Mondavi, California legend, Tim walked the family vineyards for thirty years and those of all their global partners. From Bordeaux to Tuscany, from Chile to Australia, he spoke the language of the vine, an oenologist always respected by his peers. Yet excellence in the vineyard and winery were not always matched by the financial expectations. By the end of the last century, business decisions were often decided by those sitting in large offices, far from the vineyards, affecting the strategy and ultimately the fate of the Robert Mondavi Winery (RMW). A publicly traded company, RMW began to lose focus and then control in a race against time that brought Constellation Brands in to buy the winery for 1 billion dollars in 2004. Robert Mondavi, creator and patriarch, experienced a terrible, rude awakening in the last years of his life. For his children, though it differed, it was still a tragic and difficult time. Michael chose business and trading, founding his own business. But Tim, Marcia and Robert were inconsolable at their loss and so joined efforts to start from scratch and created Continuum the following year. In 2008 they finally acquired the vines required to plant their roots again. The estate, on Pritchard Hill, is their land, an untamed place of telluric energy where one finds wild garrigue among the rows of vines set high on the mountain side. High altitude sounds, the call of the wind, the song of the birds, and

often a deep resonant silence bewitch the senses. Here, Tim lives in contact with the volcanic red soils that seem not to suffer from the extreme drought raging for past four years in Napa Valley. At dusk he breathes in the cool air that settles on the vines as the sun sets and the estate settles down for the night. After all he has experienced, he considers himself a winegrower rather than a winemaker, for the vineyard is everything to him. Yet Tim finds a similar passion energy in the cellar, a beautiful orange-ocher temple designed by Howard Backen, architect of Harlan Estate, of Bond, Kenzo Estate and Paul Hobbs Winery. Here, the same astonishing resonance, with the volcanic rocks found in the winery wall mirroring those in the hillside vineyard. Huge sliding doors open to Taransaud and François Frères oak casks as well as cement vessels. Grandness and elegance combined. The landscapes strength evidence the natural and majestic beauty of this unique estate. The winery resembles the estate or is it the reverse?

Chiara, one of Tim's five children, joins us. She is the artist of the family following in her father's footsteps. She created the estate painting, an old vine, a silhouette of a cabernet franc vine captured at sunset, which serves as the label of Continuum. The original work, Light of the Vine, welcomes you upon your arrival. A warmth and a rustic elegance are both evident in the tasting room, also showing as we taste the 2012 vintage, at a table made of an old tree, wild yet refined. The 2012 reveals black fruit, blackberry, and strong coffee aromas, while the wine, still young, is deliciously opulent. The 2006, whose grapes were not from Pritchard Hill, already shows a beautiful maturity, rose petals and a touch of licorice offsetting



AT PRITCHARD HILL, WILD VINEYARD WITH TELLURIC ENERGY, TIM MONDAVI COMES ALIVE AGAIN IN CONTACT WITH THE VOLCANIC RED SOILS.



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black fruit and cocoa. Tim Mondavi, like his wines, ages without arrogance or attitude. He dedicates his time to Continuum whose cult status is well established in California with only a few short years behind it. Every harvest, he organizes a blessing of the grapes by a Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor, a tradition established by his father Robert to honor and thank the earth for its fruits. It is said that the second life is often the right one. To Tim Mondavi, thankful and grateful for this new chance, this is obvious.

Continuum: this is a complex name, which carries with it both the past and future...

Yes, the word "Continuum" was not randomly selected. It delivers the message of our desire to continue what my grandfather, Cesare, began soon after leaving Minnesota in 1919 for the Gol-

den State and what my father did creating Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville. My grandfather was trading grapes during Prohibition but his first wines, in fact, were "officially" produced in 1933. My father worked with him for thirty years before launching Robert Mondavi Winery in 1966 at the age of 53 years. For my part, I worked thirty years also with my father before creating Continuum ... at the age of 53 years! You see, we experience all kinds of continuums!

Your motto, "One purpose, one wine, one estate, one family" is also a singular story.

When Robert Mondavi Winery was sold in 2004, my sister and I, Marcia, felt a deep sadness. It was the first time we were without vines in our lives. It quickly became apparent that we could not renounce this passion and Conti-



Its altitude of 400 meters places the vineyard above the fog line coming from the Pacific Coast.



Chiara and Tim taste the 2015 fruits. Above, a work illustrating the volcanic stone and red soils in the tasting room.



num is the fruit of this evidence. Our goal [*“One purpose”*] to produce a wine: this is our pursuit of excellence to create a first Grand Cru of California. An estate: the one we patiently sought and found on Pritchard Hill. A family: three generations from the start and now the 4th generation embarks with us, my five children and Marcia’s two children present within the company. Every day, four of my five children join me at the estate: Carissa who directs communication, Carlo who manages the West Coast market, Dante manages the East Coast and Chiara who works with me in the vineyard and the winery.

Yet you were away for a few months after the sale, they even talked about your possible “exile” in Sonoma to produce pinot noir. You finally could not resist Napa?

We do not easily give up our roots... Re-settling in an area that I know intimately, Napa Valley, allowed me to also heal the wound from the loss of our family company and to repair it too. Making wine elsewhere, as I first envisaged, was not facing my truth, it was fleeing from it. Here, on the contrary, we are given the chance to continue the goal of excellence, begun by Cesare and Robert Mondavi. I realized I had to replant our roots in this land.

Much has been written on the “Fall” of the Mondavi winery, which, perhaps, has marked the family spirit. Could you give your version of events?

I’ve talked a lot and I confess today I want to leave this behind me, behind us, to focus our energy on Continuum. But I will say this: Robert Mondavi Winery began trading on the stock market in 1993 and business decisions approved by the RMW Board of Directors mis-

sed my father’s name and began to ruin our reputation. We went from a long-term vision to a short-term one dictated by finance, aggravated by anxious board members who knew nothing growing and producing great wines and the specific management requirements related to them. The lack of vision and clarity at the top brought confusion to our customers and then bad decisions were made which led to an impossible situation. An experienced but ruthless new chairman of the board was brought in to help rebalance RMW but in reality he simply made everything look good in order to sell it to Richard Sands, the boss of Constellation Brands. [*To poor management decisions, also add family tensions which had threatened the Mondavi foundation. When he no longer had the power to control the company, Robert Mondavi resigned from the Board as did his son Michael. The only family members left were Tim and Marcia to attend the fateful final board meeting in 2004 when it took only twelve minutes for the board to accept Constellation Corporation’s offer. By then, the family no longer had enough votes to object, ed.*]

I imagine this was a difficult time after the family left RMW...

After leaving Robert Mondavi Winery, I especially felt that we needed to reclaim our name, explain who we were and clarify our intentions. I think people knew, basically, who my father was, but the company’s mishaps had dispelled this clarity. We were now more known for making small supermarket wines or for making great wines like Robert Mondavi Reserve, Opus One and Ornellaia. [*Robert Mondavi Winery was, at the time of sale, owner of Tenuta dell’Ornellaia in Tuscany and 50% owner of Opus One, which Robert Mondavi founded with the Baron Philippe de Rothschild, ed.*] Now, with Continuum, peo-



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ple can see we have a very long-term goal in the same spirit of excellence which drove Opus and Ornellaia.

For the first few years, Continuum was produced from purchased grapes, until the time was right to build this new estate and winery.

Indeed, since the first vintage in 2005, our wine was produced with grapes including the great terroir To Kalon. Then in 2008 we spotted this amazing place we were able to acquire on Pritchard Hill, above Lake Hennessey. Tasting wines here, I understood the potential and especially the sense of place that was conducive to my goal. We had to be on elevated soil, hillside, on the east side of the Valley. We also needed the good soil: volcanic, rich in iron. I have a feeling that here we have the perfect combination of soil, exposure and climate. The terroir:

volcanic gravel on clay, which absorbs water well is an asset with the drought. At an altitude of about 400 meters, this allows a more moderate climate. It's above the fog line coming from the coast and nights are very cool, preserving the vineyard, whose oldest vines date back to 1991. I made drastic selections, replanted, uprooted Syrah wines to substitute with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, to work the exposure. The 2013 is the first vintage of Continuum with Pritchard Hill grapes, "grown, produced, aged and bottled at the domaine." It's a "Bordelaise" blend: cabernet sauvignon (66%), cabernet franc (21%), petit verdot (9%) and merlot (4%). Each year, 25 to 30% of our lots are declassified and are not used in the wine because we believe they are not at the desired quality level.



Light of the Vine, Chiara's work, has become the emblem of Continuum.



With Marcia, the roots found again. On the right, Chiara in grape-harvesting time.

How does this wine express its terroir?

It represents Napa Valley first but also the identity of a specific place that is both wild, like the sage that grows on edges of the vineyard, and balanced. This wine wears this brand: it is present but without vulgarity, it's imposing but in control and without ostentation. Cabernet Sauvignon is very happy here in the Valley, it adapts itself to the warmer or cooler years, it has the structure and power necessary for our assembly base. Cabernet Franc is a grape that I love. When I test old Robert Mondavi Reserve wines, I've notice that I'm impressed the most by those that have a high percentage of cabernet franc. Its floral aromas are unique, the silkiness that's develop with aging is wonderful. Merlot, can be too strong on the valley floor, hence its absence in the first

wines Continuum produced with grapes from To Kalon, but I have a long history with this grape I know how to let it sing. And on the Napa hillsides, especially here on Pritchard Hill, it shows a very valuable silkiness and integrates perfectly in the assembly, it brings its structure. Petit Verdot is newer to my vocabulary. We had neither Malbec nor Petit Verdot at Robert Mondavi. At first I found Petit Verdot rather vulgar but as time passed, I realized that it brings some strength with its wild nose and its beautiful color. Of these four grape varieties, we currently have 15 hectares in production on a property of 70 hectares, with 9 hectares, with additional plantings in 2010 and 2013. We continue to learn every day of this incredible place; we have over thirty blocks, each with distinct personalities. All are grown naturally.

Talk about a powerful and balanced wine. Napa has a long history of producing big wines, wines that are oaked, in accordance with Robert Parker's palate. How do you see the future here without his influence?

It's the markets themselves, American and Bordeaux, which gave Robert Parker this excessive influence. I love the man and he has an incredible palate but it is his palate and it's not a universal one, and it is simply not healthy to give a single person the power to dictate the style that Cabernet Sauvignon should have! We need more references. The more tasters, the better, whether Joshua Greene (Wine & Spirits Magazine), who likes more vibrant wines, Stephen Tanzer (International Wine Cellar) or Antonio Galloni yet (Vinous) which have a preference for wine with more acidity and nerve. After all, there are as many types of wine as palates on Earth.

Bordeaux was highly criticized in the United States for excessive prices. Yet the Napa Valley is not free of this: its fine wines are now very expensive. Has the price become a criteria for wine classification?

Do not be naive: it is obvious and we did not invent anything. From the classification of 1855, which was established if I'm correct on the basis of the price of wine sales, it has an essential role. Your pricing implies a quality in the wine you produce. I also must add that the greatest wines of the Napa have a very low yield compared to the greatest wines of Bordeaux. In fact, Continuum is around 200 dollars and this is in the base range for major "Bordeaux blends". This allows us to be exactly where we want to be and recognized on

the international market. The export market, representing 25% of our production, is already well established, where historically Robert Mondavi did well: Japan, Hong Kong, Germany, Switzerland...

As director of the winemaking from 1976 to 2004 at Robert Mondavi Winery, you also had many global experiences, producing wines from US to Italy to Chile and beyond.

The defining moments?

I was lucky to taste with the likes of Henri Jayer, Lucien Sionneau [Mouton Rothschild] and Lodovico Antinori. When the latter wanted to separate himself from Tenuta dell'Ornellaia and we were in the ranks, I tried to convince not to sell. It is such a gem! But he said he liked only one thing: to create, and then he wasn't amused by the managing of a domaine ... He trusted us to take care of Ornellaia. That was in 2002. Two years later we know what happened.

Another time I was deeply marked: A trip to Europe with my father in 1973 that concluded years of study at the University of Davis. We tasted a lot of wines and my father kept asking each of them technical questions, it was exciting. One morning we arrived at Louis Trapet in Gevrey-Chambertin. He hoisted a star spangled banner alongside a tricolor flag and removed his cap to greet us, placed it on his heart, saying: *"You saved us, you Americans. Welcome to my home; it is an honor."* The ritual question my father would invariably asked: *"How do you manage to make this wine?"* Louis Trapet, like all other Burgundy wine-growers we had met before him, had responded with humility: *"Me, I've done nothing in fact it's the sky, the ground,*



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God ...” My father would leave every time flabbergasted, because in the States, it’s a safe bet that a person would respond differently, before recounting in great detail or that how they made the wine and their method to do so... It’s a memory that we often talked and we would always remark on it, even years later.

Your father would have been 100 years old in 2013. You paid tribute to him here on Pritchard Hill...

Indeed, we launched the construction of the winery in 2010 so that it would be completed to accommodate the 2013 harvest and celebrate his 100th birthday. Olive trees surrounding the winery are also a century old, they were planted in his honor. Before passing away in 2008, my father saw Pritchard Hill. We took

a small aircraft with my sister to show him the land we had purchased. He had lost the ability to speak but his smile and his eyes could tell us of his approval.

What’s your father’s legacy to you?

I owe him everything: his philosophy, his audacity! I hope to live up to it. When I’m asked about this relationship, this always reminds me of Isaac Newton’s famous quote: *“If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.”* Today it’s my turn to stand on his shoulders and try to see far ahead. I recently realized that a negative - the loss of our family business - can come out well - Continuum-, because I have never been happier. I am now in full symbiosis with this land, my vision and my role as winemaker. My dream has come true. ✦

