

NOTES ON TASTING WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

Continuum Plants Its Flag on Pritchard Hill

Ten years in, Tim Mondavi's Napa flagship and its Sage Mountain Vineyard are hitting their stride



Sage Mountain Vineyard on Pritchard Hill (Greg Gorman)

By James Molesworth

Sep 26, 2019

Senior editor James Molesworth is [Wine Spectator's lead taster for California Cabernet Sauvignon](#). He recently returned to Napa Valley for more visits with top wineries. And [don't miss our Q&A with James](#) on his Napa Cab eureka moments, his scoring philosophy, and what he's up to when he's not tasting wine.

The first time I visited [Continuum](#) was a [few years back](#), well before I started officially covering California Cabernet, so I was happy to get reacquainted with the property that now serves as the home for the Mondavi clan. On my last visit the first few tanks had been moved into the cellar, and the team, led by Tim Mondavi with his daughters Carissa and Chiara, was still settling into the new digs.

At his property atop [Pritchard Hill](#) and looking down on the [To Kalon Vineyard](#) across the

valley, Tim notes he's now in his 47th vintage of handling his family's wines. While [the sale of his father's namesake Robert Mondavi Winery to Constellation Brands](#) surely took a toll, he seems more than happy atop the mountain.

The site is now nearly fully developed, incorporating parcels that were planted in the early '90s with more modern plantings. The 173-acre estate has 62 acres under vine, with plans to max out at 70 acres. Merlot has been removed from some parcels, dropping it to just 5% of the plantings, with Petit Verdot now up to 10%, along with Cabernet Franc at 30% and the rest Cabernet Sauvignon. The commitment to Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc is notable in a valley obsessed with Cabernet Sauvignon.

"I really like Petit Verdot," says Tim plainly. "[Ornellaia](#) turned me on to it and Cabernet Franc. The brambly character, depth of color and sense of perfume. There's substance and extract to it and it really adds to the blend."



Tim Mondavi's vision for Continuum is coming into focus. (Greg Gorman)

With its elevation ranging between 1,300 and 1,600 feet, Continuum's site, now named Sage Mountain Vineyard, runs 2° to 10° cooler by day than the valley floor, but retains the day's warmth better, running 5° to 10° warmer by night.

"So the vines are in the photosynthetic sweet spot more often," notes Tim. And the vineyard's new name wasn't just plucked out of nowhere. The flora on Pritchard Hill is distinctly different from the valley floor, with a wild [garrigue](#)-like scent of sage, thyme and savory notes that comes through in the wine. Continuum is fermented in a mix of concrete and wooden vats and then aged in two-thirds new oak, allowing both the fruit and *garrigue* notes to shine.

"There's more *there* there with mountain fruit," says Tim. "There's more extract in general, and more than what we saw when we worked with To Kalon fruit down below, for example. Mountain fruit has more of everything. More tannins, more concentration, more floral notes, more minerality, more expression."

The first three vintages of Continuum—2005 through 2007—were sourced from To Kalon, and today those wines are showing the pedigree and expression of that vineyard, with plush, broad feel, warm cassis and plum fruit and a backdrop of loam on the finish. Starting with the 2008 vintage, Continuum began to transition to the Pritchard Hill site, increasing steadily through the 2011 vintage. These vintages have also aged well, with the 2008 the most advanced of the group. It and the 2009 feel like valley floor wines. It's when we get to the 2010, which has over 90 percent fruit from Pritchard Hill, that Continuum starts to take on its current form, with a racier feel, a piercing iron hint and the first inklings of sage and sassafras in the aromatics.

The wine has been sourced entirely from the Sage Mountain Vineyard since 2012, and the 2013 is the first vintage to be made in the winery built on the estate. With the '13 the Cabernet percentage starts to drop as well, to two-thirds of the blend, and by the current 2016 it's less than half the blend, with nearly one-third Cabernet Franc, a hefty 18 percent Petit Verdot and a drop of Merlot. It's an impressive run of vintages, mirroring the quality of Napa Valley in general during the [drought run](#).

The **2013 Continuum Napa Valley** remains tightly wound, with its iron streak leading the way and the fruit still in reserve. The **2014** is fully formed, with a wide range of expressive lavender, sage, thyme and violet notes backed by gently steeped currant and plum fruit. The **2015** is very, very vibrant with its display of fruit, with a long, layered finish showing only a hint of minerality for now. The **2016** is arguably the best vintage yet for Continuum, warm in feel but clearly defined as the racy iron streak dovetails perfectly on the finish, backing the sage, bay and lavender aromatics and cassis fruit core.

It's an authoritative wine. And one that shows the Mondavis have now clearly settled into their new home.

Follow James Molesworth on Instagram at [@jmolesworth1](#) [<http://instagram.com/jmolesworth1/>], and on Twitter at [@jmolesworth1](#) [<http://twitter.com/jmolesworth1>].