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Decades after the Mondavis lost their California wine empire, their comeback winery is ready for its big debut

By Jess Lander, Staff Writer
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"I've discovered that a bag of money doesn't make up for a broken heart, but it does (lead to) a new love," said Tim Mondavi, 75, the youngest son of legendary winemaker Robert Mondavi and co-founder of Continuum Estate. "Continuum is our new love."
Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

This spring, alcohol beverage conglomerate Constellation Brands, which owns Napa's famed Robert Mondavi Winery, unveiled an ambitious, $200 million transformation of the 50-year-old winery.

Just ten miles away, the Mondavi family was quietly putting the finishing touches on its own, albeit more humble, reveal.

The new Estate House at Continuum Estate, the Napa winery founded in 2005 by Robert Mondavi and several of his children and grandchildren, opened this summer. (Though without the pageantry of Robert Mondavi Winery, which hired John Legend to perform at its grand opening party.) Continuum is the Mondavi family's first

endeavor for which it grows, produces and bottles everything from its estate, which Tim Mondavi, Continuum's co-founder and Robert Mondavi's son, called the "the highest pursuit." Set steps from Continuum's vines on Napa's illustrious Pritchard Hill, widely considered the region's crown jewel of Cabernet Sauvignon production, the 5,000-square-foot tasting space represents the final step in the family's two-decade journey of reinstating its place in the fine wine world.



Continuum Estate was founded by the Mondavi family in 2005, shortly after the sale of Robert Mondavi Winery to Constellation Brands.

Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

"The vines are right there," Tim Mondavi, 75, said. "We want people to feel the vineyard. Feel the land. See the Bay, the key to our climate, to the freshness and vibrancy (in our wines)."

Continuum was born out of heartbreak. In 2004, 38 years after Robert Mondavi Winery was founded and helped put California wine on the map, the winery (and its lower-tier brands, like Woodbridge) were sold to Constellation for more than $1 billion. Tim Mondavi, the youngest of Robert Mondavi's three children, largely blamed the sale on the company going public in 1993, which it did, in part, to fund "replanting all the vineyards at once" after the phylloxera epidemic. In its later years, it was reportedly in financial turmoil, and as a public company, its priorities had shifted to profit over quality, which diluted its reputation. Tim Mondavi said he "was against a lot of decisions" made during that time, and the family lost much of its voting control ahead of the sale.



Continuum doesn't offer a set food pairing with its tastings; visitors are instead encouraged to request a customized food experience, such as lunch, dinner or a cooking class with chef Sarah Scott.

Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

"We were broken-hearted, but we did have a bag of money," Tim Mondavi, who had worked alongside his father at the winery since 1974, said. At 53 — the same age his father was when he founded Robert Mondavi Winery — Tim Mondavi felt compelled to start a new wine venture for the family. "I've discovered that a bag of money doesn't make up for a broken heart, but it does (lead to) a new love. Continuum is our new love."

After several years of searching for the ideal site, Tim Mondavi and his sister, Marcia Mondavi Borger, purchased the first parcel of the Pritchard Hill estate, which he described as "a grand cru on top of the world," in 2008. (The second continuous parcel was purchased in 2009.) Their five adult children joined them in the project, and Robert Mondavi was also "a partner in this when we first started," Carissa Mondavi, Tim Mondavi's daughter and Continuum's head of hospitality and communications, said. One month before her grandfather died in 2008 at 94, he visited the estate. "It was like he was waiting to see our roots back in the soil."

Most California wine collectors know Continuum, but it's not the household name Robert Mondavi Winery is — and that's the point. Like most of Napa's ultra-premium Cabernet houses, Continuum was designed around the idea of precision, which lends itself to scarcity: It produces just 4,500 cases of wine a year, and its pricing, $310 for its

flagship bottle, is well beyond the average wine buyer's budget. The winery is arguably everything Robert Mondavi Winery, now a corporate grocery brand, isn't, but for Tim Mondavi, that's not a slight on what his father built. Instead, he's looking to build on his family's century-old legacy of being at the forefront of the California wine industry.



Continuum Estate is owned and operated by the Mondavi family, including, from left, Dante Mondavi, Chiara Mondavi, Carlo Mondavi, Tim Mondavi, Carissa Mondavi and Brian Borger.

Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

Cesare Mondavi, Tim's grandfather, moved to Lodi in the 1920s to start a grape packaging business that shipped grapes across the country for homemade wine during Prohibition. His recognition of the potential of Napa Valley's terroir encouraged his son, Robert, to go there. "My grandfather said, 'Bobby, go to Napa Valley.' It was against the trend. Money was made in the Central Valley," Tim Mondavi said. "We've continued that trend upward, from the Central Valley to the (Napa) Valley floor, and here we are up on the hillside."

The Mondavis built Continuum in phases. First, they planted the 173-acre estate to 66 acres of vines: More than 40 individual blocks of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot. Tim Mondavi said Cabernet Franc, especially, "does incredibly well in these volcanic soils." Continuum's Sage Mountain Vineyard is farmed meticulously, utilizing a mix of organic, biodynamic, regenerative and experimental, data-driven practices, to ensure that vines can produce for many more decades. (Tim

Mondavi, who once saved Robert Mondavi Winery's famous I Block of 1940s Sauvignon Blanc vines from being ripped out, has an affinity for older vines, which produce higher-quality grapes.) "I think one thing that led to my father's success was clarity of focus," Tim Mondavi said, "and what led to our demise is that (Robert Mondavi Winery) just completely lost focus."

The small, high-tech winery, featuring large concrete and oak fermenters — now a standard in premium winemaking — was completed in 2013. "There's no stainless steel," Tim Mondavi said. "It's ironic, since my father was the one popularizing steel tanks." An olive grove at the entrance of the winery, named "Robert's Grove," has a bust sculpture of him. Later this year, the family will finish digging more than 12,000 square feet of caves.



The Estate House, which debuted this summer, is a 5,000-square-foot tasting space at Continuum Estate.
Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

For years, the Mondavis hosted limited tastings inside a home built on the summit, 1,500 feet above sea level, by the property's previous owners. Recently, they tore the house down to its studs and constructed a new hospitality space within the same footprint. It still looks more or less like a family home, though a very sleek one. Paintings by Tim's daughter, Chiara Mondavi, add warmth to the space; the original painting she created for Continuum's label, which depicts the silhouette of a majestic Cabernet Franc vine her father planted at the famed To Kalon Vineyard 25 years earlier, hangs in the entryway. (Today, that vine is roughly 45 years old.)

The building's Valley Room is made for groups. It has a long table and a stunning view of Napa Valley and Mount Saint Helena through a long wall of floor-to-ceiling glass that can open up on warm days. The main tasting room, designed like a living room, features plush green furniture in the shade of unripened grapes, and boasts panoramic views. Outdoor seating is set among Continuum's pollinator garden.

Visits ($200, or complimentary with purchase of a 3-pack of Continuum) begin with a pour of Sentium, a zippy, yet serious Sauvignon Blanc, sourced from Mendocino County and made by the fourth-generation Mondavis. Guests embark on an in-depth tour of the vineyard and winery, then finish their visit with a tasting of Continuum's two estate wines: Novicium, a Cabernet-forward blend inspired by the Robert Mondavi Winery Cabernets of their past, and the flagship, Continuum, which has a pretty even balance of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. The wines are served alongside the estate's olive oil and a cheese plate with other accoutrements.



The kitchen at the Continuum Estate is run by Sarah Scott, the executive chef at Robert Mondavi Winery between 1993 and 2006.
Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

The Mondavis built an enormous kitchen within the new space and hired Sarah Scott, the executive chef at Robert Mondavi Winery from 1993 to 2006 (and also Opus One from 2021 to 2024) to create Continuum's food program. It's another homage to Tim Mondavi's heritage: His grandparents instilled the "culture of being social and sharing a great meal" over wine in his father, who, along with his wife, Margrit, was one of the first to integrate food into California wine hospitality. "My grandfather always emphasized the culture of wines. It's not about pomp and circumstance; it's about putting people at ease," Carissa Mondavi said. "We want to showcase how easy this is to bring home, how good food and good wine enhance how you live."

Scott was involved in Robert Mondavi Winery's Great Chefs Program, launched in the 1970s. Throughout the program's decades-long run, the winery flew in top chefs from across the world — Jacques Pepin, Martha Stewart, Daniel Boulud, Charlie Trotter and Alice Waters, to name a few — to offer guests cooking classes and meals. Scott recalled that chefs often struggled to find the ingredients they needed in Napa Valley, so they had to get creative; one chef flew from France with pig bladders in his suitcase, while another had salmon taxi'd up from San Francisco.

Unlike most Napa wineries, Continuum isn't offering a set food pairing with its tastings, but visitors are encouraged to request a customized food experience, such as lunch, dinner or a cooking class with Scott. The family plans to launch a dinner series inspired by the Great Chefs Program later on.

"This has been generations in the making," Tim Mondavi said. "We believe we've got one of the most beautiful and high-quality vineyards in the world, but have to be able to convince people of that. The estate house is the final point in that."

Continuum Estate. 1677 Sage Canyon Rd, St Helena. continuumestate.com