

Happy 50th Anniversary, Robert Mondavi Wines



Sometimes, we in the wine world are so focused on the latest and greatest cult wine or hottest new trend in wine, that we forget about wines with genuine pedigree and history. Wines that deserve more attention and praise than they often receive. Such is the case with the incredibly classic and consistent wines of Robert Mondavi in Napa Valley.

This summer marks the 50th anniversary of the first vintage of Robert Mondavi wines. There is no question that the indelible mark that Robert Mondavi left on vineyard management and winemaking in Napa Valley a half-century ago is one of the most compelling reasons for the success of Napa Valley wines today. It's not a bold statement; it's a fact. And his legacy is more vibrant today than ever.

Mondavi, born on June 18, 1913, the third child of Cesare and Rosa Mondavi, genuinely believed in the old adage that "all ships rise with the tide." He sought out knowledge from winemakers all over the world and freely shared it with his colleagues back home. He was also the first to lend a hand to fellow winemakers. Jamie Davies, who along with her husband Jack, tells about the time that she first met Mondavi back in 1965. She and Jack had just purchased the old Schramsberg estate and wanted to make a French-style sparkling wine. Jamie recalls telling Mondavi about their dream and his reaction, "He was throwing his arms around us... sort of excited and he said, 'You're trying to do what? You guys are crazy. You're even crazier than I am.... Sure, I'll help. Because if you succeed, we all succeed.'"

At his own winery, Robert Mondavi embraced such innovations as cold fermentation (a nod to his brother Peter), large French oak barrel fermentation, and French oak barrel aging. He aged some of his Sauvignon Blanc wines in barrels and called it "Fume Blanc" – even persuading the ATF to grant him a special permit to use the name as an alternative to the varietal – which helped create a huge market for his wine. But more than anyone else in the industry, he argued for the quality of Napa Valley wines on the world stage, putting up his wines, along with other wines from Napa Valley, against some of the greatest wines in the world.

Geneviève Janssens, Director of Winemaking for Robert Mondavi Winery in the Napa Valley since 1997, never takes credit for her extraordinary streak of producing enjoyable wines. She refers to all of her wines as made in the style of her mentor. She always says she makes the wines according to, "Mr. Mondavi's vision." Today, while she misses her daily interactions with Mr. Mondavi, she is thrilled to be at the winery, carrying on his legacy. "With our To Kalon Cellar finished and the new vineyard projects underway, this is an exciting time for the winery... for me," she says. "I am proud to be the torchbearer of Mr. Mondavi's vision."

Of course, with a wine program as extensive as the Robert Mondavi Winery, Ms. Janssens is fortunate to have some very capable help. Joe Harden, a graduate of UC Davis Viticulture and Enology program, joined the Robert Mondavi Winery team in 2013 and today leads the red winemaking program. Megan Schofield, a native of Ontario, Canada, is the newest member of the winemaker team where she leads the Napa, Oakville and Reserve wine programs for their hallmark Fumé Blanc wines, as well as the cool climate Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs from Carneros-Napa Valley. She also collaborates with the winemaking team in crafting their celebrated Cabernet Sauvignons.

Even though Mondavi passed away in 2008, his legacy lives on in his wines and in his influence lives on with so many others in Napa Valley (and beyond). Here are just a handful of remarkable wines from a renowned Napa Valley winery.

Robert Mondavi cut his proverbial teeth with Sauvignon Blanc, which he had renamed "Fumé Blanc" in order to develop greater market appeal. The **2014 Robert Mondavi Winery Fumé Blanc Napa Valley** is the wine that helped start it all 60 years ago! Made from a blend of Sauvignon Blanc (94%), and Semillon (6%), the wine sports a nose of zesty lemon and orange citrus scents. In the mouth, the juicy flavors of ripe peach, nectarine, and fresh pineapple shines from beginning to end. The finish expresses fresh minerality and a pop of Meyer Lemon that keeps the wine bracingly focused. **\$20**

The To Kalon Vineyard is one of the most famous vineyards in Napa Valley (if not the world). In addition to being arguably the greatest place in the world to grow Cabernet Sauvignon, it is also home to some of the oldest Sauvignon Blanc vines in the Valley. The grapes for the **2014 Robert Mondavi Winery Fumé Blanc Reserve To Kalon Vineyard Napa Valley** were hand harvested in the cool of the morning and gently pressed as whole clusters, minimizing skin contact to retain freshness and vibrancy. Almost all of the juice was barrel fermented in French oak, then aged on its lees for nine months. A very small amount (2%) of Sémillon was added, providing the final blend a richer mouth feel and further complexity. This wine has its feet firmly in the alluvial soils that give it wonderful richness and minerality. Ripe with touches of peach and nectarine fruit, lemon zest and a touch of fennel coat the tongue. The structure is dense-yet-creamy, leaving a rich and full impression in the mouth. **\$50**

For fans of unoaked Chardonnay, the **2014 Robert Mondavi Winery Unoaked Chardonnay** from Napa Valley fills the bill beautifully. Aromatic fruit is allowed to shine through on the palate with notes of green apple, ripe tangerine and pear, and a touch of orange zest. The finish is bright and clean, with hints of grapefruit on a slightly creamy frame, thanks to stirring the wines while on the lees. **\$34**

To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the winery, the winemaking team created a special bottling for the occasion. The wine was inspired by memories of Robert Mondavi conducting an orchestra during a gala celebration commemorating the opening of the To Kalon cellar in 2000. An homage to Mondavi's love of Bordeaux wines, the **2013 Robert Mondavi Winery Maestro Red Blend** from Napa Valley is a blend of 59% Merlot, 25% Cabernet Franc, 7% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Petit Verdot, and 3% Malbec. Just like an orchestra, each varietal plays its part, yet all contribute to the whole. The nose has wonderful aromas of blue and black fruit, spice, cedar and vanilla. The palate is bright and forward with blackberry, cassis, dark plum, cedar, licorice, tobacco and a touch of vanilla. This is a great expression of quality Napa Valley fruit. **\$50**

One of my favorite Napa Valley red wines for the money is the newly minted **2012 Robert Mondavi Winery BDX Red Wine** from the Oakville district in Napa Valley. The fruit for this delicious blend of 91% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Cabernet Franc and 1% Petit Verdot comes from the famed To Kalon vineyard. It is a classically styled wine that combines ripe blackberry fruit with notes of black currant and wild blueberry flavors with a touch of dried herb, cedar and tobacco notes. The fine-grained tannins provide an elegant backdrop for the dark fruit and chocolate notes on the elegant finish. **\$65**

If you really want to see how good Napa Cabernet Sauvignon can be, then check out the **2012 Robert Mondavi Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve To Kalon Vineyard** from the Oakville AVA in Napa Valley, California. A blend of 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petite Verdot, this wine is where power meets finesse. It boasts an incredible nose with abundant aromas of crème de cassis, chocolate, blackberries and licorice. Powerful flavors of blackberry and blueberry fruit combine with notes of cinnamon, sage, cedar and tobacco in the mouth. The long, complex, full-bodied finish offers up a savory treat of sage and black licorice and an ultra-rich mouthfeel, all thanks to the remarkable fruit from the To Kalon Vineyard. At **\$155**, it is worth every penny. If you can resist the urge to drink it now, I suggest putting it away today and enjoy it in four or five years.