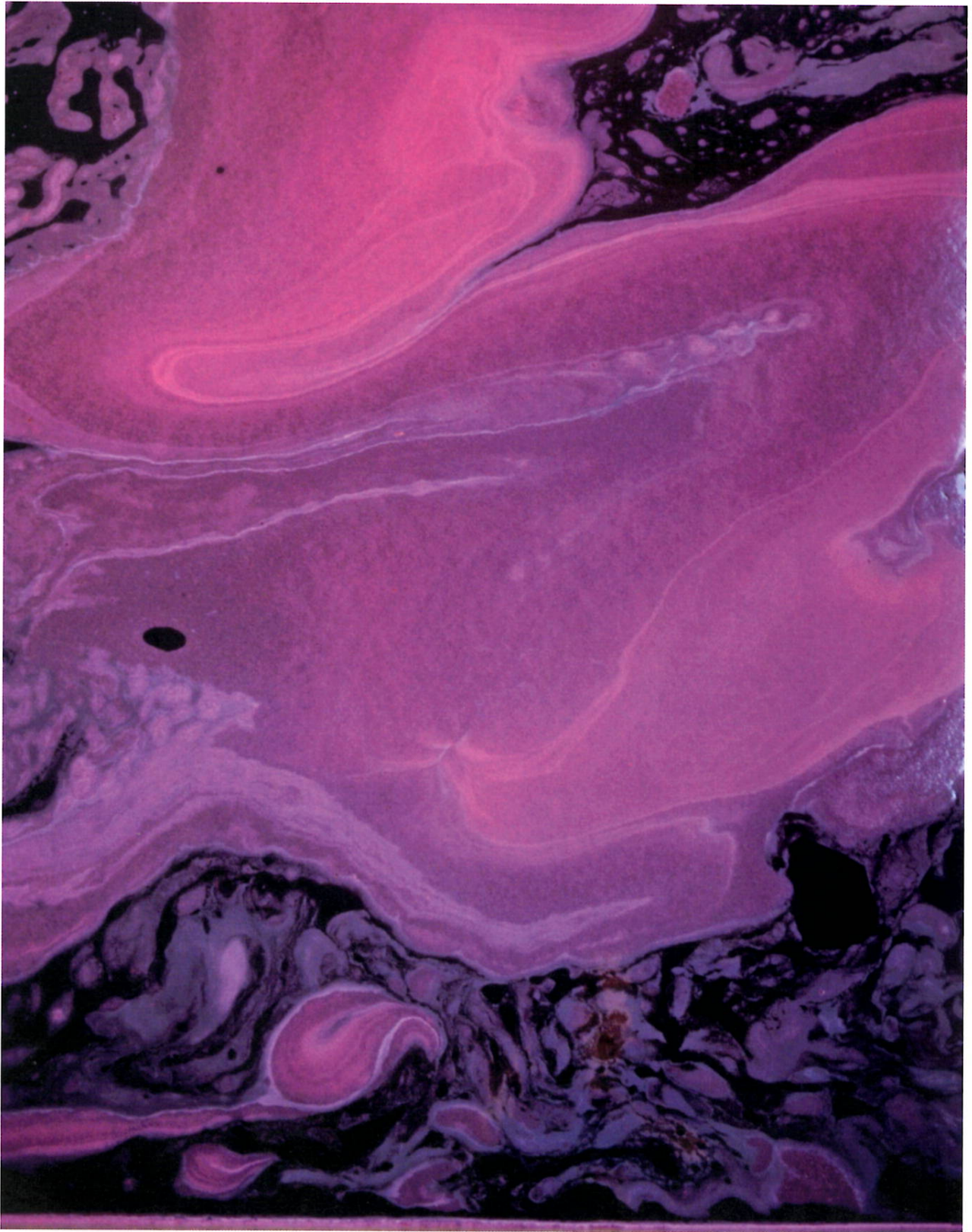


FINE WINE



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Many close to the family were **appalled** that Robert Mondavi himself would have to witness the dissection of the company he had worked so hard to create. **Constellation** – now the largest wine company in the world, with an annual production of 80 million cases (E & J Gallo, of Modesto, is next largest, with about 70 million cases) – has insisted that Mondavi's **fine wines will flourish** under the new ownership

Overwhelmingly pleased with the outcome of the harvest, winemakers will remember 2004 for grape clusters with small berries and ripe flavours; they expect to produce wines of exceptional concentration and power. The quality of the wine being prepared now has already been compared to that of the 1999 vintage, with stunning fruit and long-term ageing potential. The quantity may be lower than in previous years, but the quality should prove exceptional.

Positive reports came from both the northern and central growing regions of California. When harvest was over, Karen Culler said, 'I am very, very happy – I was optimistic from the beginning. There were no spring rains and things started growing well, particularly compared with 2003, which was wetter and cooler.'

While the length of the season was essentially the same as in 2003, in 2004 the fruit was picked just in time to escape an early cold front: by all accounts, 99 per cent of the grapes had been brought in by the end of October, when more than 23cm (9in) of rain fell. Winter had begun.

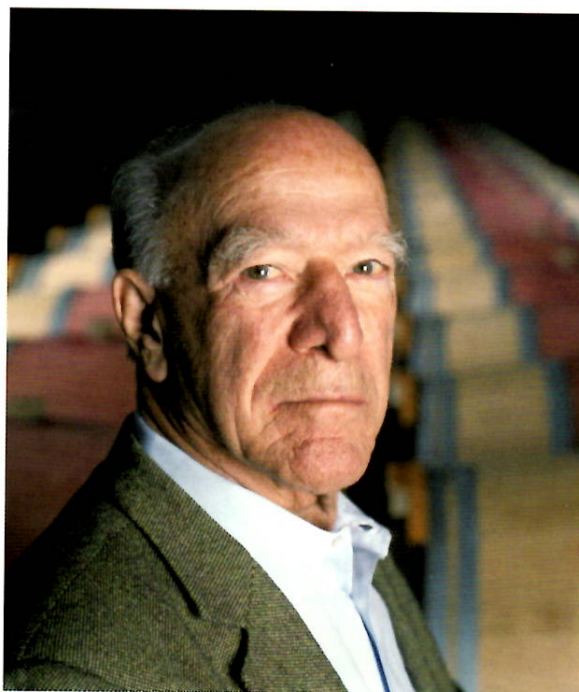
California scheming: Mondavi changes hands

by Carolyn Tillie

All eyes were on California-based Robert Mondavi Winery this autumn as a modern soap opera unfolded – one involving protagonists from the wine industry and

Wall Street, a chorus of Napa Valley residents, last-minute plot twists and, for many, a surprise ending.

In the middle of September, the board of directors of the Robert Mondavi Corporation announced that it would sell the core assets of the wine empire that 91-year-old Robert Mondavi and his son R Michael Mondavi began building in 1966.



Robert Mondavi

These included the flagship To-Kalon winery in Oakville, substantial quality-producing vineyards in Stags' Leap and Carneros, as well as California icon Opus One (founded in 1978 via a partnership with Baron Philippe de Rothschild), Viña Seña in Chile, and Luce della Vite and Ornellaia in Italy. Michael Mondavi offered to step down as vice chairman but was meant to continue serving on the board

along with brother Timothy Mondavi and sister Marcia Mondavi Berger. Robert's son Peter quit when the decision was announced.

The strategy was to spin off the highest-priced, small-production wines – as well as recently purchased Byron Winery and Vineyards in Santa Maria, and Arrowood Winery and Vineyards in Sonoma – in order to focus instead on 'premium and super-premium lifestyle wines' – larger-production, lower-priced labels such as Woodbridge, Robert Mondavi Private Reserve, La Famiglia and a few other, more obscure labels. At US\$15 or less per bottle, these wines contribute 81 per cent of the company's revenue.

Business issues aside, many close to the family were appalled that Robert Mondavi himself would have to witness the dissection of the company he had worked so hard to create – and they questioned whether anyone in the family would have the resources to regain it privately.

Wall Street responded positively: within a few weeks, the corporation's stock rose on the news that one of the world's largest wine and spirits conglomerates – Constellation Brands (owner of such diverse brands as Black Velvet Canadian Whiskey, Corona beer and BRL Hardy) – had made an unsolicited offer estimated at US\$1.3 billion (37 per cent more than the company was worth on that day), with the proviso that all of Mondavi's labels and luxury-wine divisions be included in the deal.

The wild rumpus started. Mondavi, indicating that it would consider the offer, continued restructuring and announced that shareholders would have a chance to vote on 30 November on the proposed recapitalisation programme. Within two days, a lawsuit was filed on behalf of shareholders Bamboo Partners, over the company's decision not to accept immediately Constellation's offer. Two more class-action suits followed amid claims that the company was not acting in the best interests of the shareholders.

Just as the corporation announced net quarterly losses and laid off a third of its workforce, Constellation's bid was accepted on 3 November. The deal will keep all Mondavi brands intact rather than dispersing them among different owners. While founder Robert will stay on as brand ambassador, and consultant winemaker Tim is likely to have a role, plans for other family members have not yet been disclosed. Constellation – now the largest wine company in the world, with an annual production of 80 million cases (E & J Gallo, of Modesto, is next largest, with about 70 million cases) – has insisted that Mondavi's fine wines will flourish under the new ownership.

Picture this: wine on the silver screen

by Maggie Rosen

The next Academy Awards may require a new category: Best Film About Wine. Not since the romantic comedy *French Kiss* – in which Kevin Kline plays a vine-smuggling con artist – has wine loomed so large on screen. This year's contenders are *Mondovino*, a documentary about the wine industry, and *Sideways*, a buddy movie about two guys on a road trip through California wine country. While both films' stars are household names, just how recognisable they are depends very much on the household.

Mondovino, directed by Jonathan Nossiter (also a sommelier), features Robert Parker, making his screen debut, along with a very memorable dog, international man of vinous mystery Michel Rolland, the Mondavis and their nemesis Aimé Guibert, and a host of other luminaries of the wine world who strut and fret their 135 minutes upon the stage, providing insight into how the industry got to where it is today. It's a story of the multigenerational family business versus the corporate machine, traditional hands-in-the-dirt farming and feet-in-the-barrel grape-stomping versus white-coated scientists mixing potions in squeaky clean labs, the Old World versus the New and, of course, the raging debate over whether great wines are 'born' or made.

Not surprisingly, the film has kicked up a lot of dirt in France, where it opened at the beginning of November, and it will probably do the same in other countries as well. It's timely and prescient, for



Aimé Guibert in *Mondovino*



Hubert de Montille in *Mondovino*

example, in its portrayal of the Mondavi empire before the recent takeover by Constellation. And while the characters speak for themselves in a lively, unscripted and surprisingly candid way (winemaker Alix de Montille, daughter of Volnay man Hubert, says on camera that she plans to quit her job at Boisset), their insights illustrate the director's very strong point of view that wine is a metaphor for much of what ails us these days – that 'Parkerisation', 'Rollandisation' and 'Napa-isation' are latter-day symbols of globalisation. 'Fundamentally, this is my love letter to wine, which to me is the most beautiful notion in the world,' said Jonathan Nossiter. 'I think terroir has been misappropriated by the evil agents of marketing, and as in many other industries and areas of the world that are undergoing major changes at the hands of those whose main concern is money and power, we are seeing a backlash.'