



THIRST

A new generation of Mondavis branches out with Pinot Noir

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Photo: Alvin Jornada / The Chronicle



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Carlo (left) and Dante Mondavi founded Raen Winery to focus on Pinot Noir from western Sonoma County, including this site outside Freestone.

The telling of the Mondavi story always involves a through line, a continuation of the tale started when Cesare and Rosa Mondavi came west in 1919, shaking off their Minnesota blues.

Their legacy defined each successive generation, and when it comes to Robert Mondavi and his progeny, that legacy hinges on Napa Valley, and Cabernet.

The October debut of Raen, a new label from Carlo and Dante Mondavi, Tim Mondavi's two sons (Robert's grandsons), provided a notable detour from the standard Mondavi tale.



For one thing, the brothers cast their fate to Pinot Noir, not a grape so well associated with the Mondavis, although there are echoes in the family's past. They also crossed county lines into Sonoma, and looked far west, all the way to the coast.

Many wineries have done such things before Raen (the name involves a lengthy acronym; also, Carlo says, "My dad would always say, 'Rain turns to wine every year'"). But it is largely untrod ground for the Mondavis. With an expected production of just 700 cases, Raen is microscopic compared with most Mondavi projects of yore.

California has its share of wine progeny riffing on their parents' work. Recently we've witnessed Taken, from Josh Phelps (son of Chris Phelps), and Carlo Trinchero (Trinchero Family); also the Mascot from Will (son of Bill) Harlan. The question always surfaces: Are these vanity projects, or can they succeed as serious endeavors?

Raen certainly seems to be headed for the latter. It is an intimate, hands-on effort, which differentiates the Mondavi brothers' work from that of their cousins, the other fourth-generation Mondavis. Rob Mondavi Jr., son of Tim's brother Michael, has created more mass-market wines through his father's company, Folio. The closest in scale to Raen might be Dark

Matter, a \$100-per-bottle Zinfandel made by Angelina Mondavi, daughter of Tim's cousin Marc, and her sisters.

Raen, meantime, has taken aim directly at California's avant-garde, a place not necessarily occupied by the Mondavis in recent years. The style of Pinot Noir being made by Carlo and Dante, with a hand from Kristof Anderson (Scribe), has propelled the Sonoma Coast's more extreme corners to fame, and not a small amount of controversy: bright, evanescent wines with as much mineral as fruit distinction; a reliance on whole-cluster fermentation; a bare minimum of new oak; modest alcohol levels.

"There's this delicacy we wanted to capture," Carlo says. His father was duly impressed: "I think they were able to hit it."

Their range of wines from 2013 and 2014 include a Sonoma Coast bottling (currently from a planting near Joseph Phelps' Freestone project); an Occidental bottling and forthcoming Occidental South (again, from near Freestone); and a Fort Ross-Seaview, from vineyards near David Hirsch's well-known property on the coast. The wines show a clarity and confidence in their flavors that, to be candid, is rare among most Pinot debuts.

It is a very different endeavor from [Continuum Estate](#), which Tim Mondavi launched in 2005. Continuum, an estate high on Napa's Pritchard Hill, makes about 2,700 cases of a single Cabernet-based wine (plus a second bottling, Novicium) with a clear mandate: Stick to the core mission.

But as I mentioned earlier, Raen is less of a departure than it seems. Pinot does have a minor place in the Mondavi family tale. While Robert swooned over Bordeaux, Tim was taken with Burgundy, and produced modest amounts of Pinot Noir for more than two decades, until the Robert Mondavi Winery's sale to Constellation Brands in 2004.

The Mondavi Pinots were a footnote, obscured amid the family's clamor for Cabernet, and sourced from where any Napan sought that grape in the 1970s: the cooler Carneros area. As time went on, it became evident that Carneros, with its heavy soils, would struggle to hit the same heights as wines farther toward the coast. But Pinot remained a quiet point of pride for Tim.

As if to make this point, Carlo and Dante open for me several vintages of their father's handiwork: a 1977 that retains fresh fruit amid old rusty orange flavors; a 1981 that's fresher and anise-tinged. They are curious, if not exceptional, snapshots of the state's Pinot past.

But the wines also serve as a reminder of how quickly California's Pinot story has evolved. When those early bottles appeared, western Sonoma was barely considered viable for sparkling wine, much less still.

Today, however, the state of the art has shifted, so the two brothers looked far west for Raen — hoping to evoke more depth and freshness in the wines than what had been possible during their father's Pinot heyday.

“At that time, Carneros was the cooler area. And now we've gone farther,” Carlo says. “Carneros wines can be amazing, but they just don't have that next layer.”

Crucially, Raen also presented an opportunity for the two brothers to stretch their legs a bit after years of working in the family business. Both worked for Tim during the Robert Mondavi Winery days. Dante spent several years as Continuum's cellar master, while Carlo wandered farther afield, founding Davi, a line of luxury skin-care products.

At the time, their father's main concern was in establishing Continuum as a clear next act after the sale to Constellation. “I didn't want anyone in my family to stretch that,” Tim says. Now, with nearly a decade of vintages past, “we're confident enough to allow other things.”

But distance wasn't a bad idea. It has always been clear that while Continuum is a family effort (one daughter, Carissa, does marketing; another, Chiara, designs the labels) it is first and foremost a platform for Tim's talents, predominantly with Cabernet.

“We love Continuum,” Dante says, “but it's very much Dad's project.”

So the younger generation had a good reason to strike out on its own.

Still, this being a Mondavi production, family ties are manifest. Sister Chiara also designed Raen's labels, and Tim frequently visits the cellar to taste his sons' work and offer his

expertise — although, says Dante, “not as much as we’d like.”

From the notebook

2013 Raen Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$45, 13.3% alcohol): Has the freshness and slight conifer-like aroma often found in wines from the coastal fog belt, along with abundant fruit.

2013 Fort Ross-Seaview (\$55, 13%): Surprisingly even more generous in its flavors, with an intense mineral signature familiar in wines from that part of Sonoma.

2013 Occidental (\$55, 13.1%): This has more tart fruit but also a subtle meatiness. A sample of 2014 from a vineyard near Freestone, dubbed “Royal St. Robert” in tribute to their grandfather, stands out amid forthcoming wines for its bright intensity of fruit.

The wines are in limited release and available via mailing list at www.raenwinery.com.

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