


FROM THE GRAPEVINE



By JOEL M. FISHER
With Matthew N. Fisher

ACF/Chefs de Cuisine Association of California
11664 National Blvd. # 410
Los Angeles, CA 90064
ACFLA: 818-559-5218



Joel M. Fisher, PHD
WINE COLUMNIST
CULINARY CONNECTION

Email: joel@winevineanddine.com Cell: 818-429-6770

May-June 2008

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY

JOEL M. FISHER

with Matthew N. Fisher

The birth of this column follows the recent passing of Robert Mondavi. In some sense, we all knew Robert Mondavi – he was larger than life, and he transformed the standing of Napa Valley in the wine world. Although he was not a participant in the great Paris Tasting of 1976, the event widely credited with bringing Napa international recognition for its wines, Mondavi hardly sat on the sidelines as wine lovers flocked to his beloved Napa Valley.

I had the great pleasure of meeting Mondavi a few times. At once iconic and approachable, his passing forces us to confront a number of questions. Who will follow Robert Mondavi as the great spokesman for California, for Napa, and for wine? Before looking forward, though, I want to take a moment and look back through my memories of California wine over the last 40 years.

I vividly remember when Napa Valley sold something called [Gray Riesling](#), a grape widely planted in California in the 70s (and still found in the Jura region of France). At about the same time, Mondavi made a wine from Sauvignon Blanc grapes and named it "[Fume Blanc](#)," an innovation that marked the beginning of a string of successes. The French name helped, and the wine still sells "prodigiously," as Shawn Hubler notes in the *Los Angeles Times*. I enjoyed Mondavi's other wines, too, and whenever they disappointed I was always certain that it was simply a matter of time until they improved. His joint venture with the Rothschild Family created [Opus One](#), the well-known high-end wine that has enjoyed considerable popularity. Mondavi was an early leader in wine education, as well – I recall a beloved and incredibly knowledgeable old character named "Doc" who conducted classes in the tasting room.

Outside of the tasting room, however, wine has to stand on its own, without explanation. Mondavi made wines that could perform, whether Chardonnay (witness his 1997 victory at the Grand European Jury Wine Tasting) or [Opus One's premium Cabernet Sauvignons](#).

If one person deserves credit for pushing California wines into the world's markets as, simply, great wines, it is Robert Mondavi.

If you drive north on Highway 29 into Napa Valley, on your left you see the beautiful imposing winery that announces itself to the world as the “Robert Mondavi Winery.” If you visit the University of California, Davis, you can see the [Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science](#), and visit the [Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts](#). Yet another important project was the creation of [COPIA: The American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts](#). Mondavi co-founded COPIA with another icon – Julia Childs. Mondavi's legacy goes beyond wine itself, and extends to food, culture, and the communities that surround them, brought together by a love of fine wine.

Who can take Robert Mondavi's place? I can only hope someone else can work as tirelessly on behalf of California wines as Mondavi did.



Joel M. Fisher, Ph.D. was Wine Instructor for the Culinary Arts Department of the Art Institute of California, Los Angeles for over seven years. Afterwards, he taught at Cordon Bleu, in Pasadena, California. He is Director of Public Affairs for Avalon Hollywood, and as a partner in WineVine&Dine conducts wine tastings, dinners, and wine-and-food pairings throughout Southern California. He is, since 2005, the organizer of the successful and ongoing Los Angeles Winefest. **Matthew Fisher** has joined the senior Dr. Fisher on 7 wine trips through Europe and America, mostly in charge of not getting lost.

