

What's Happening

THE MELODRAMA IS INTOXICATING IN THIS SAGA ABOUT THE MONDAVI WINE DYNASTY

LISA ALBERS Special to the P-I

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A fistfight erupts over a mink coat. An eldest son is banished from the family business. A mother hides her alcoholism; a sister threatens suicide. Sounds like a soap opera plot, but this family saga centered in Napa Valley is real.

In "The House of Mondavi: The Rise and Fall of an American Wine Dynasty" (Gotham Books, 452 pages, \$28), **Julia Flynn Siler** tells the true story of the Mondavis, America's first family of wine.

Immigrants Rosa and Cesare Mondavi came to the United States in 1906 from Sassoferrato, Italy. They passed through Ellis Island and settled in Minnesota, where they Americanized the pronunciation of their name to "Mon-day-vee."

Fast-forward 100 years: Internecine battles plague the family, tearing them apart. However, Cesare's eldest son, Robert, has not only made Napa Valley famous for its wines but has elevated wine as a culinary art in the United States. Robert's children and grandchildren are poised to inherit his legacy, including the name, pronounced Mon-dah-vee again and synonymous with wine. But through a bewildering series of betrayals and failures, they lose it all.

Flynn Siler interviewed 250 people for the exhaustively detailed "House of Mondavi," which is not authorized by the family although she did speak with most of the family members. A reporter for The Wall Street Journal, she began her research with this question: Why was Robert Mondavi's son, Michael, taking a leave of absence from his duties as chairman?

"The post is unusual for a sabbatical, as it's already a ceremonial one," she explained in a phone interview from her home in San Francisco. Two other peculiarities alerted her to the story: The company had for the first time appointed a non-family member as chief executive officer. And the PR office at Robert Mondavi Corp. - famously open to all press - refused to answer questions.

Flynn Siler watched the stock listings for MOND and saw a red flag waving her in the direction of wine country.

Although her interest began with the company, as with most closely held family businesses, the story of the company was the story of a family - and one member in particular: Robert Mondavi. He was ousted from the business that Cesare had rebuilt (Charles Krug) but went on to launch his more successful venture, Robert Mondavi Corp., which became a global enterprise and then a publicly traded entity in 1993.

"I was fascinated by him as a character from the start," Flynn Siler said. "The company is named after him; he sold the name when he sold it. In order to tell the business story, I had to understand the larger-than-life quality of its founder."

Robert is in his 90s now, and while she did speak with him, Flynn Siler said she wished she had been able to interview him during his heyday.

"My reporting drew a full portrait of a man who was an optimist and worked extremely hard throughout his life." While his exuberant ideas often presented a challenge to his pragmatic brother Peter, Flynn Siler said Robert "rightly believed that they would pay off in market reception."

But this is no court commission from Napa Valley's retiring king. Flynn Siler documents Robert's neglect of his first wife and children and his infidelity, along with his indulgent practice of taking daily massages on company grounds.

While Flynn Siler admitted that her book holds appeal for wine enthusiasts - Tuesday's reading at Novelty Hill-Januik Winery includes a tasting - she thinks any reader will enjoy the story. A supermarket wine shelf looks innocuous, but look again, and you'll see the wines of two battling brothers: CK Mondavi (from Peter's Charles Krug winery) next to a Robert Mondavi wine. "The history is in those bottles," she said.

Lisa Albers is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor who can be reached at lisaalbers@comcast.net.

COMING UP: JULIA FLYNN SILER WHAT: Reads from her debut work of non-fiction, "The House of Mondavi: The Rise and Fall of an American Wine Dynasty" WHEN/WHERE: Monday, 7:30 p.m., The Elliott Bay Book Co., 101 S. Main St., free; Tuesday, 7 p.m., Novelty Hill-Januik Winery, 14710 Woodinville-Redmond Road N.E., \$25 includes wine and cheese tasting

Color Photos; Caption: Flynn Siler

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