

Life And Arts

DRINK IN THE STORY OF THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MONDAVIS

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ROBERT MONDAVI is the last of the titans who helped create the California wine industry and made it into one of the most powerful and influential wine regions in the world.

It was he and the Gallo brothers, among a handful of others, who were there when Prohibition was repealed in 1933 and seized the opportunity to carve an empire for themselves and their families from an industry that virtually did not exist.

But while the Gallo boys began their quest at the helm of their business and were able to exert full control, Mondavi was tethered to a family that was at utter odds with his ideas and dreams. So it wasn't until the late 1960s, when he was in his 50s, that Mondavi was finally given the opportunity to unleash his ambition.

The story of how he created a family dynasty while shaping the image of all American wines and becoming enormously wealthy is a story as juicy and delicious as any Napa Valley wine. It is a story that has ambition, wealth, power, greed, hubris and love. It's a study in American entrepreneurship - Harvard Business School has written five case studies of the Robert Mondavi Corp. - and it is a cautionary tale of how blood is no match for unbridled family emotions and money.

It's a story worth telling, and author **Julia Flynn Siler**, in her account of the drama titled "The House of Mondavi: The Rise and Fall of an American Wine Dynasty" (Gotham Books, \$28), tells it well.

The story begins in 1906 with Robert's father, Cesare Mondavi, arriving at Ellis Island, and continues as it tells of how the empire was created and how, ultimately, in 2005, the dynasty collapsed.

Robert Mondavi was always a man of passion. I will always remember how excited he was when he told me of the great epiphany he had during his first trip to France. That experience changed his life and, by extension, the destiny of Napa Valley and the American wine industry.

He recalled how he dined at a three-star restaurant in France's northern Rhone Valley with a famous French winemaker. His epiphany was how elegant the wines were and how well they paired with the food. He had never experienced anything like it and he vowed to dedicate his life to not only making this style of wine but also convincing Americans that this is how they should experience wine and food.

Mondavi created a mantra that he would repeat to anyone who would listen. He preached that wine is part of a healthy lifestyle and wines should be elegant and made to go with food and that Napa Valley can produce wines as good as any in the world. He made it an important part of his autobiography, which he wrote at age 85 when he was certain he was ageless and indestructible and thought anyone could achieve what he had if they would only listen to him.

He was wrong on all three counts, and although his basic credo was still correct there were fewer and fewer acolytes. The problem was that wines were beginning to be judged on how big and powerful they were and the descriptor "elegant" had become a pejorative. Wine critics didn't like elegant wines and they pilloried Mondavi for his stubbornness in producing them.

And he had other problems. He had taken the winery public in the mid-1990s and business was no longer just a family matter. He put control of the company in the hands of his sons, Michael and Timothy, who fought like Cain and Abel and eventually were banished from the business, and the company was dismantled and sold. The dynasty was gone.

Siler, a writer for The Wall Street Journal, does a first-rate job of creating a balanced view of this epic

American drama. Her research is exhaustive and she leaves nothing out. The book reads like a novel and her crisp style makes the book compelling regardless of whether the reader has an interest in wine.

"The House of Mondavi" gives insight into a complicated story that offers an insider's look at how Napa Valley was created. It's a great summer read, but it also belongs on the reference shelf of any wine library.

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ON WINE

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