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# Hugging Margrit Mondavi

*L Pierce Carson*

They decorated the venue with thousands of roses.

They prepared a special meal, paired with the best wines.

They sent video tributes.

They sang to her.

They sang her praises.

They embraced her with heartfelt hugs, kind words and the respect she's earned as a champion of the arts.

Last Saturday night, Festival Napa Valley, Jan and Maria Manetti Shrem along with Far Niente Winery hosted an awesome tribute to the first lady of Napa Valley wine, Margrit Mondavi, on the eve of her 91st birthday.

More than 250 friends, fans, family members and festivalgoers gathered in the stunning glen downhill from Gil and Beth Nickel's

landmark wine cellar to share their feelings about a woman who with her late husband, Robert, helped elevate the status of Napa Valley and its wines.

For several hours, guests took the opportunity to share their thoughts about the Switzerland-born lady who championed artists at the winery gallery, invited renowned chefs to share their secrets at winery cooking classes and established the long-running Robert Mondavi Summer Music Festival, now in its 47th year.

Before a sumptuous dinner prepared by celebrated cookbook author/TV chef Lidia Bastianich and her chef at New York's Felidia, Fortunato Nicotra, saxophonist Dave Koz serenaded the honoree with his smooth jazz version of "Over the Rainbow." He invited vocalist Monica Mancini to the stage for the world premiere of a song on which he collaborated with singer/songwriter Clint Holmes. Koz composed "What You Leave Behind" as an instrumental a few years ago and Holmes added lyrics, recently recording the work.

While dedicating the song to Margrit, Koz noted it was the winery's vice president of cultural affairs who first brought him to the valley to perform — and that he returned six more times to play at the summer festival. "I thought she might have a crush on me," he confessed. "Margrit lives her life like a work of art. She knows every day is a gift."

Conductor Carlo Ponti, speaking on behalf of his mother, Sophia

Loren — who sat at Margrit’s left elbow — and brother Edoardo, noted the honoree “encouraged all of us to follow our passions.” His Los Angeles Virtuosi Orchestra gave its premiere performance at Festival Napa Valley two years ago and has as its goal “bettering the lives of young people. You’re inspiration to me.”

"You are my idol," declared philanthropist Maria Manetti Shrem. "You’ve given us joy and an appreciation for living ... and you’ve helped students from all over the world in enology and the arts (with substantial donations for both programs at UC Davis). Because of you, Jan and I are opening an art museum at UC Davis (later this year)."

“When Sophia learned of the tribute, she wanted to be here,” Shrem added. “She flew in from Zurich yesterday ... they lost her luggage. It arrived (in the valley) at 5 this afternoon. But she was

ready to come in Carlo Ponti's pajamas."

Hostess Beth Nickel credited Margrit Mondavi with helping create an environment that's allowed the arts and all cultural endeavors to flourish along with the valley's food and wine scene.

"When Gil and I fell off the onion truck 37 years ago, we were surrounded by the greatness of Robert Mondavi's vineyards," Nickel declared. "When we unveiled our plans to restore Far Niente, Bob and Margrit were so supportive ... and you endorsed our plans for Nickel and Nickel (Winery). Margrit has always been one of my heroes. You have inspired so many people. I'm touched to pay tribute to you because you are one in a zillion."

"Margrit Mondavi has done more than anyone to make the Napa Valley what it is today," added Rick Walker, Festival Napa Valley president/CEO.

"I'm glad to be here to celebrate your life," enthused chef Lidia Bastianich. "We met at the opening of Felidia. You and Bob came to the opening of our restaurant, and supported a chef nobody knew. I just love being here."

Blue-eyed soul singer Boz Scaggs is on tour at the moment, so he videotaped a greeting that included a promise to sing "My Funny Valentine" to Margrit when he returns to the valley.

Additional videotaped tributes screened Saturday night came from culinary kings Jacques Pepin and Thomas Keller as well as wine royalty, Piero Antinori and Lamberto Frescobaldi. Students at UC Davis also sent their thanks with pre-recorded messages.

Turning to her dinner companion near the end of the evening, Margrit reminded all that Sophia Loren “is the most beautiful woman in the world. I can’t tell you the joy she has given me with her films. I shall never wash my cheek again,” she added after receiving a peck from the celebrated screen star.

Referencing friends and her family — daughters Annie Roberts (and husband Keith) and Phoebe Holbrook (and husband Hal) — the honoree asked but one favor. “Let’s hold the world together,” she appealed.

Board of directors chairman Timothy Blackburn announced that Festival Napa Valley’s Arts For All Fund henceforth will be dedicated to Margrit Mondavi.

To sum up, the gathering at Far Niente showed the degree to which Margrit is held in high esteem. It was a lovefest, to be sure. And, as one would expect, Margrit loved every minute of it. After all, she earned it.