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Friday, November 4, 2016

San Francisco Social Diary: The First Lady of Napa



The Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville, Napa Valley. The late vintners and philanthropists Margrit and Robert Mondavi were instrumental in transforming Napa Valley into a wine, food, and culture mecca.

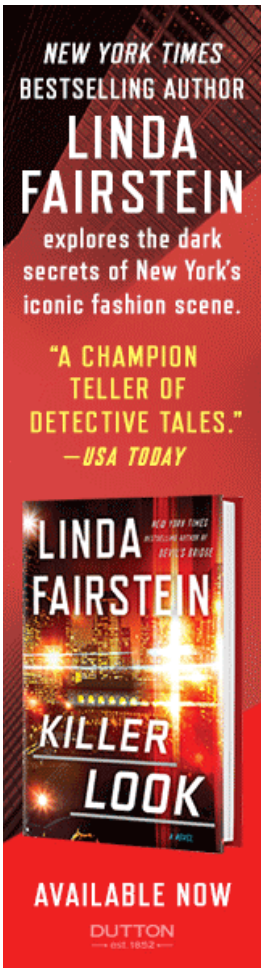
by Jeanne Lawrence

NAPA VALLEY – "SALUTE, SANTE, CHEERS, MARGRIT! Tonight we raise our glass to you!" read the invitation from **Festival Napa Valley**, for a tribute to **Margrit Biever Mondavi** this past July.

The 91-year-old widow of vintner **Robert Mondavi**, who is credited with putting California wines on the world map, Margrit was honored for her more than four decades of dedicated work to help fine art, music, food, and wine flourish in the California wine country.

I flew in for the occasion to be with my dear friend, knowing she had been ill and fearing this Festival might be her last. Indeed, just weeks later, on September 2, Margrit's remarkable life came to an end.

Though each of the ten evening events at Festival 2016 was extraordinary, the one honoring Margrit at the Far Niente Winery was to me the most extraordinary of all.





Margrit Mondavi, one of Napa's most revered and influential figures, showcased fine food and wine, and encouraged and supported great vintners, chefs, artists, and musicians.



Robert and Margrit Mondavi celebrated his 90th birthday in June 2003, five years before he passed away. During their 28-year marriage, they traveled the world to promote California wines.

FAR NIENTE WINERY

I've attended Festival Napa Valley every July since it launched in 2005, and

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consider the festivities at Far Niente Winery to always be among the best. In part, that's because the historic stone winery that overlooks the Valley makes me feel like I'm on a movie set.



Founded in 1885, *Far Niente*—Italian for "without a care"—is set back from the main road, Highway 29, near Oakville Crossing.

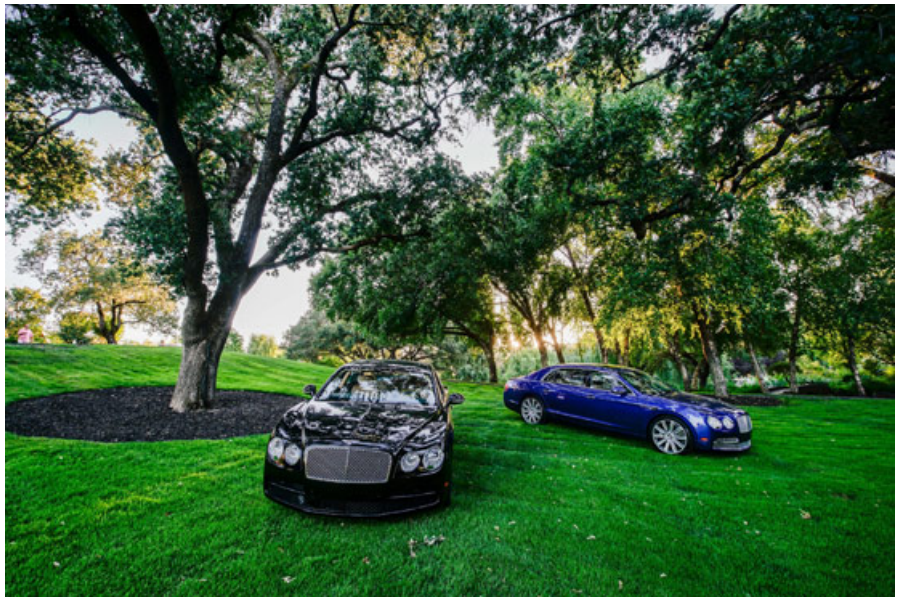


Arriving for cocktails were Jan Shrem, Beatrice Ruini, Camilla Ruini, Rick Walker, Sophia Loren, Maria Manetti Shrem, Carlo Ponti Jr., and Andrea **Mészáros** Ponti.



ALSO IN ACROSS THE NATION/ACROSS THE WORLD

- 10.21.16: Miami Social Diary
- 10.6.16: CHINA INSTITUTE CELEBRATES 90th YEAR GALA
- 9.28.16: Boca Raton Social Diary
- 9.13.16: San Francisco Social Diary
- 7.29.16: July in Paris: All that glitters
- 6.24.16: Santa Barbara Photoplay, Part II
- 6.15.16: San Francisco Social Diary: 2016 Festival Napa Valley, Part II
- 6.13.16: West Coast Diary
- 6.3.16: San Francisco Social Diary: 2016 Festival Napa Valley
- 5.27.16: South Florida Social Diary: Ft. Lauderdale & Palm Beach



Tesla, one of the 2016 Festival sponsors, displayed their luxurious electric cars in the Woodland Gardens, one of the most verdant landscapes in the Valley.

A STAR-STUDDED TRIBUTE

More than 300 guests came to pay tribute to the irrepressible Margrit, including family and friends, fellow vintners, artists and celebrities from other fields.

Among them was another legend: the Academy Awards-winning Italian actress **Sophia Loren,** who flew in from Switzerland accompanied by her son, conductor **Carlo Ponti Jr.,** and his wife, violinist **Andrea Mészáros Ponti.**



Often referred to as "the First Lady of Napa," Margrit Mondavi was recalled for her charm, her warmth, her quick sense of humor, and her *joie de vivre*.

5.24.16: Washington Social Diary: The Washington Opera Ball

5.16.16: San Francisco Social Diary

4.22.16: San Francisco Social Diary: The Oscar de la Renta Gala

4.13.16: Sarasota Social Diary

3.30.16: San Francisco Social Diary: The San Francisco Ballet & FOG Design + Art Fair

More Across The Nation/Across The World >>







Actress Sophia Loren, who has appeared in more than 100 movies and is still working, with her son, conductor Carlo Ponti Jr.

Lidia Bastianich, host of “Lidia’s Kitchen,” the TV show, opened her renowned New York Italian restaurant Felidia in 1981. She came to honor her good friend Margrit’s contribution to Napa Valley food and wine culture.

Italian chef **Fortunato Nicotra** greeted his compatriot Sophia Loren by exclaiming, “You’ve been my idol since way back.”



Lidia Bastianich and Fortunato Nicotra, the executive chef at Lidia’s New York dining institution Felidia.

MARGRIT BIEVER MONDAVI, “THE AMBASSADOR OF NAPA VALLEY”

“No one better exemplifies the philanthropic spirit and the passion for art, music, food, and wine of the Festival than Margrit,” said new Festival Board Chair **Timothy Blackburn**.

Her encouragement and nurturing of the Festival have made it part of her legacy. Festival President **Rick Walker** said she inspired everyone to live life to its fullest.



Festival Board Chair Timothy Blackburn with his wife Athena Blackburn.



Festival President Rick Walker with his wife Karen Walker.

DRINKS UNDER THE CANOPY

At the sold-out evening event, guests arrived amid an enchanted forest of towering redwoods, acacias, dogwoods, and century-old cork oak trees.



We enjoyed nibbles and Far Niente wines on an ideally balmy summer evening.



Charles Rashall, Kathleen Korb, and Michael Polenske.



Peter and Merle Mullin, from Los Angeles.



Shahpar and Darioush Khaledi, proprietors of Darioush Winery.



Steven and Claire Stull, with Martha Bredon.



Olivia Decker with Michael and Pepper Jackson, from Palm Beach and Napa Valley.



Dario Sattui, owner of Castello di Amorosa in Calistoga, and Irina Yartseva.



Daru Kawalkowski, Roger and Anne Walther, and Alton Irby.



Guests enjoyed creative passed hors d'oeuvres by celebrity chef Lidia Bastianich.



Gallerists Serge and Tatiana Sorokko.



Lisa and John Grotts.



Vintners Agustin Huneeus, of Quintessa Winery, and Clarke Swanson, of Swanson Vineyards.



Vintners Elizabeth and Clarke Swanson.



Jeanne Lawrence and Olivia Decker.

THE OFFICIAL WELCOME AND TOASTS

As they have every year since the Festival began, Far Niente co-owners **Beth Nickel** and **Larry Maguire** generously hosted an event. Their vineyard was a perfect place to honor Margit, since it is next door to the Mondavi Vineyard, and Far Niente founders Beth Nickel and her late husband, **Gil Nickel**, enjoyed a long friendship with the Mondavis.



Larry Maguire, co-owner and President of Far Niente Winery, with his wife Karen Maguire.



Festival President Rick Walker and Far Niente Winery co-owner Beth Nickel.

In his welcoming speech, Larry Maguire noted that during his childhood in Napa, “Italian food” meant spaghetti and meatballs. Then Margrit arrived and inspired locals to think more seriously about both food and art. He offered her a toast of thanks.

The current Michelin Guide gives three-star status to two Napa Valley restaurants: **Chef Keller’s** The French Laundry and Chef Kostow’s The Restaurant at Meadowood.



Dinner guests gathered under a tent surrounded by the serene Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards in Oakville.



Larry Maguire, co-owner and President of Far Niente Winery.



Beth Nickel, co-owner of Far Niente Winery.

Maria Manetti Shrem thanked Margrit for her and her husband's work in

turning Napa Valley into a sophisticated paradise, called Margrit “my idol,” and fondly acknowledged Margrit’s joy and passion for “the art of living.”



Far Niente and the Festival hosted the 2016 dinner, with additional support by Maria Manetti Shrem and Jan Shrem.

CONDUCTOR CARLO PONTI JR.

Sophia Loren came in support of both her friend Margrit and her son Carlo Ponti Jr., who conducted the orchestra on the Festival’s last night. He was music director and principal conductor of the San Bernardino Symphony from 2001 until 2012, and in 2013 he founded the Los Angeles Virtuosi Orchestra.

“I’m honored to be part of this special night,” Carlo said, adding, “I still have the bottle of wine you gave us when we married.”

“If I were you, I’d drink it!” was Margrit’s riposte.

“We did drink it” Carlo said, “... but we kept the bottle,” drawing chuckles from the crowd.



Carlo Ponti Jr. has been associate conductor of the Russian National Orchestra since 2000.



Margrit Mondavi, Jeanne Lawrence, Maria Manetti Shrem, and Sophia Loren. Though Ms. Loren's luggage arrived only an hour before the 6 p.m. dinner, she managed to appear on time, looking stunning.

MARGRIT TAKES THE MICROPHONE

From her wheelchair, Margrit responded to the accolades with a speech that was the evening's highlight.

She said she was overwhelmed and overjoyed "a thousand times," told some anecdotes about her more than forty years in the Napa Valley, and thanked Sophia Loren for her support, adding that the she would have liked to have had long legs just like the film star. The crowd was enchanted by Margrit's spirit and wit.



When Sophia kissed her on the cheek, Margrit said, "I'm never going to wash my face again!" to the crowd's amusement.



Margrit encouraged Maria Manetti Shrem and Jan Shrem to build the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis and donated $2 million in seed money.

THE MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

Before dinner, jazz superstar **Dave Koz** and Grammy-nominated vocalist **Monica Mancini** (daughter of composer **Henry Mancini**) offered entertainment.

Many in the audience were moved by the performance of “Hope,” which stirred up many wonderful memories of Margrit mixed with regrets about her illness.



The lyrics “Touch of hope” and “What you leave behind” were especially apropos for an evening that was a tribute to Margrit and her legacy.



Saying Margrit “lived life like a work of art,” Dave Koz dedicated his saxophone rendition of “Somewhere over the Rainbow” to her.



Monica Mancini’s heartfelt introduction and singing moved many to tears.

CELEBRITY CHEF DINNER

After Far Niente Winery CEO Larry Maguire introduced celebrity chef Lidia **Bastianich** as “kitchen royalty,” she took the stage and explained that her long friendship with Robert and Margrit began when they were early supporters of Felidia, which she opened more than three decades ago.

“With all my heart,” she said to Margrit, “today I celebrate all you do for humanity and culture.”



Jeanne Lawrence, Chef Lidia Bastianich, and Ken Monnens.

Chef Lidia**Bastianich** and Executive Chef **Fortunato Nicotra prepared a superb meal that** began with lobster salad with heirloom tomato paired with 2013 Far Niente Cave Collection Chardonnay. The main course was a beef striploin tagliata with 2013 Far Niente Estate Bottled Cabernet Sauvignon and a 2009 Far Niente Cave Collection Cabernet Sauvignon.



The lobster “caprese” salad reflected how both Italian and Californian cuisines emphasize fresh, local ingredients.



Of course, dinner was accompanied by Far Niente's superlative Cabernet and Chardonnay vintages.

DESSERT IN THE GARDEN

After dinner, guests headed to the Cabernet Grill to choose among the dessert buffet temptations and share comments about how special the night was. Reluctant to tear ourselves away from the "Liquid Gold" 2010 Far Niente Dolce and the delicious lemon meringue tarts, our group was one of the last to leave. As the evening drew to a close, we could hear crickets chirping, enjoyed the twinkling stars overhead, and savored the special atmosphere of Napa Valley wine country.






DOLCE

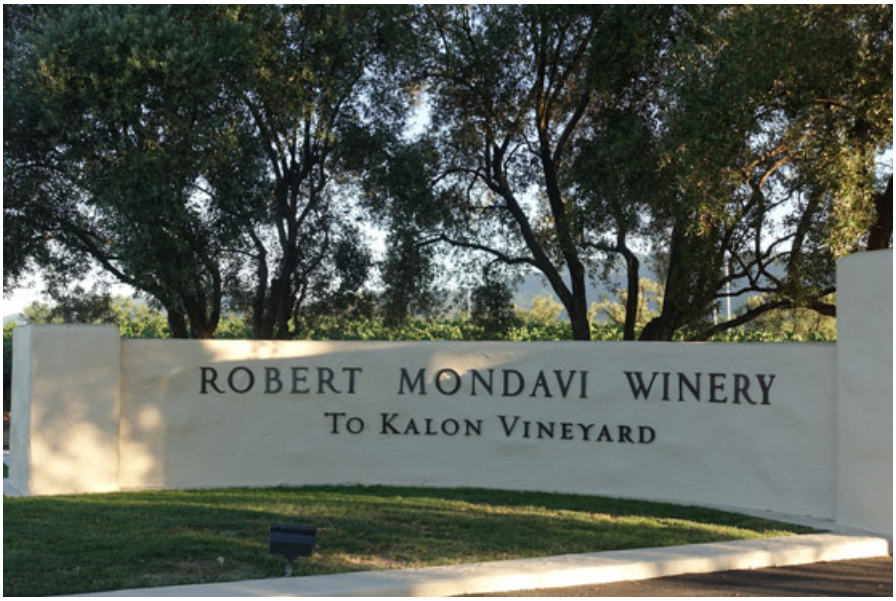




THE FESTIVAL FINALE: SUNDAY'S OPERA GALA

For its grand finale on the following evening, the Festival presented the Opera Gala at Lincoln Center. Carlo Ponti Jr. conducted the **Festival Orchestra NAPA**, made up of master musicians from around the world. They were joined by two of opera's most exciting young stars—tenor **Michael Fabiano** and mezzo-soprano **Isabel Leonard**.

The performance was followed by dinner at the Robert Mondavi Winery, which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year.



Mondavi Winery's historic To Kalon Vineyard produces some of the world's finest Cabernets Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc grapes.



Opera singers Michael Fabiano and Isabel Leonard at Robert Mondavi Winery, after their performance at Lincoln Center.

LOSING MARGRIT MONDAVI: THE END OF AN ERA

Six weeks after the Festival Napa Valley tribute, Margrit Mondavi passed away. To the end, she was energetic, social, and witty, and still supporting her many cultural causes, among which the Festival was a favorite.

Festival President Rick Walker said Margrit was the guiding light in creating Festival Napa Valley. He admired her joy and generosity, and noted that she brought people together through food, wine, and culture, and "brought out the very best in everyone lucky enough to know her."



Festival President Rick Walker with Margrit Mondavi at the 2014 Festival Napa Valley.

MARGRIT AT FESTIVAL NAPA VALLEY IN RECENT YEARS



The ever-gracious Margrit Mondavi with Craig and Kathryn Hall, of Hall Napa Valley, at Quintessa Winery in 2011.



The grandes dames of Napa Valley: Margrit Mondavi and Carolyn Pride at Pride Mountain Vineyards in 2011.



Stephanie Lawrence and Margrit Mondavi at the Festival's Meadowood Gala in St. Helena in 2011.



Paul and Vida Vazin, Margrit Mondavi, and Shahpar and Darioush Khaledi at Darioush Winery in 2013.



Pepper Jackson, Jeanne Lawrence, and Margrit Mondavi at Opus One Winery in 2013.



Maria Shustorovich, Margrit Mondavi, and Star Jones at Sinegal Family Estate in 2013.



Maria Manetti Shrem and Margrit Mondavi in 2015, when Margrit was the “Festival Honoree.”



Margrit and Paul Pelosi at the Meadowood Gala in 2015.

THE MONDAVI POWER COUPLE'S LEGACY AND VISION

When Robert Mondavi founded his namesake winery fifty years ago, his goal was to put Napa Valley on the worldwide wine map. Margrit, originally the Winery's public relations director, integrated cultural and culinary activities into the plan.

As the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported, "Robert Mondavi deserves credit for revolutionizing Napa's wine industry. Ms. Mondavi deserves just as much for transforming the valley into a paradise of cultural sophistication."



Under the direction of Robert and Margrit Mondavi, the Mondavi Winery was one of the first to offer tours, tastings, and culinary and art programs.



At Robert Mondavi Winery, sculptor Beniamino Bufano's St. Francis of Assisi statue references the Franciscan friars who introduced grapes to California 200 years ago.

FOUNDERS OF THE SUMMER MUSIC FESTIVAL

In 1969, Margrit founded the popular Summer Music Festival to benefit the Napa Valley Symphony. Celebrated participants included **Ella Fitzgerald, Harry Belafonte, Boz Scaggs,** and **Tony Bennett**.



The Mondavi Winery Summer Music Festival was a casual Sunday evening affair that drew over 700 friends and families to enjoy picnic baskets and wine on the lawn.



Margrit Mondavi with Gayle and Pete Wilson, former governor of California, at the 2004 Summer Music Festival.



Margrit kicking off the 36th annual Summer Music Festival in 2005.



Hosts Margrit and Bob Mondavi with friends at the Summer Music Festival in 2005.

FINE DINING & FINE ART PROGRAMS

A passionate cook, Margrit launched The Great Chefs Cooking School at the Winery in 1976. Among the school's guest chefs were **Paul Bocuse**, **Michel Guérard, Joel Robuchon**, **Jacques Pepin**, **Alice Waters**, **Thomas Keller, Jeremiah Tower**, **Julia Child**, **Wolfgang Puck**, and **Martha Stewart**.



Margrit Mondavi with chef Alice Waters, who is credited with starting the farm-to-table movement and California Cuisine.



Celebrating birthdays: Margrit and friends dining at Alice Waters' Chez Panisse in Berkeley, CA.



Robert and Margrit Mondavi with Julia Child, who introduced French cuisine to America.



Margrit Mondavi with French chef and television personality Jacques Pépin.

Also an accomplished painter, Margrit invited illustrious artists such as **Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, Helen Frankenthaler,** and **Nathan Oliveira** to participate in the Winery's art programs.

After the winery was sold to Constellation Brands in 2004, Margrit received the title of Vice President of Cultural Affairs, and continued to curate its cultural programs.



In 2012 at the age of 87, Margrit published *Margrit Mondavi's Sketchbook: Reflections on Wine, Food, Art, Family, Romance and Life*, an autobiography illustrated with her sketches.

INTERNATIONAL IMPACT

The Mondavis invited top international winemakers to Mondavi Winery, from the French **Rothschilds** to the Italian **Frescobaldis and Antinoris. Robert**

founded a second winery, Opus One in Napa Valley's Oakville, with Baron Philippe de Rothschild, of Bordeaux's Château Mouton Rothschild.



Opus One Winery in Oakville, Napa Valley, founded in 1979.



Margrit Mondavi with her husband Robert and Baron Philippe de Rothschild, founding partners of Opus One winery.



The Mondavis with Valery Gergiev, director of the Russian Mariinsky Theatre, Italian vintner Marchese Piero Antinori, Maria Manetti Shrem, and opera superstar Placido Domingo in 2004.



Margrit and Bob Mondavi with Marchese Piero Antinori, of the Florentine wine family, Maria Manetti Shrem, and Jeanne Lawrence at a luncheon in honor of Piero in 2005.

GENEROUS PHILANTHROPISTS

In addition to their winery and involvement in Festival Napa Valley and other artistic ventures, Margrit and Bob Mondavi were involved in many other philanthropic activities.

They gifted $10 million to help establish the Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts and $25 million to create the Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science, both at University of California Davis.



The Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts offers a diverse selection of public performance for students and the community at large.



The Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science at UC Davis is one of the top-ranked agriculture schools in the world.

In Napa, the Mondavis supported the Napa Valley Symphony with proceeds from the winery's Summer Music Festival, co-founded the Oxbow art school in 1998, and launched the now defunct Copia American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts, among many other projects.



The Mondavis helped fund the l997 restoration the Italianate-style Napa Valley Opera House, which opened in 1880 with a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore*.



The couple also founded the Napa Valley Wine Auction in 1981, which today has grown into a four-day charity celebration of food and wine benefitting causes in Napa County.

A WELL-LIVED LIFE

The visionary Bob Mondavi championed California wines, while Margrit's passion for art and gracious living fueled her lifelong efforts to integrate the pleasures of music and art with fine drinking and dining. Together, the charismatic couple served as ambassadors for California wine and helped transform Napa Valley into the epicenter of American wine culture.

A toast to you, Margrit and Bob! We'll miss you both!



Photos by **Drew Altizer, Jeanne Lawrence, Festival Napa Valley, Napa Valley Opera House,** and **UC Davis.**

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