



SOUL OF THE VINE
Michael Mondavi

JOVIALY GREETING visitors and spryly sidestepping a yapping Chihuahua terrier, the tall and lean Michael Mondavi arrives early to our interview at his tasting room in the Carneros region of Napa Valley. His sparkling blue eyes and energy belie his age: The 71-year-old United

1K member is still traipsing the world, for business and pleasure. His most recent travels have been for Michael Mondavi Family Estate and its newest wine, Animo, a cabernet from Animo Vineyard that is in stores this month.

Mondavi has been intimately involved with wine since he was a child. He first tasted it as a toddler (his grandmother believed a little wine with water was good for babies), while the Charles Krug winery (which was owned by his grandfather, Cesare Mondavi) was his jungle gym and its cellar master his babysitter.

No one contributed more to Napa's rise as the capital of U.S. winemaking than the Mondavis, who won international accolades and guided the American palate to appreciate more than just sweet dessert wines. But the meteoric rise of Robert Mondavi Winery, its 1993 IPO and other problems caused friction within the clan, ultimately leading them to sell the company—and the Robert Mondavi Winery name—in 2004.

NAPA VALLEY'S FIRST FAMILY RISES AGAIN

Michael Mondavi's lifelong thirst for wine—and the wine business—can't be quenched

“It got to where I was running a consumer products company rather than a wine company,” Mondavi says of his role at the time as CEO.

He couldn't stay away for long, though, and in 2006 opened Michael Mondavi Family Estate, which produces 25,000 cases of

wine a year, versus more than 10 million at Robert Mondavi. “They probably spilled more than we make,” Mondavi jokes.

Mondavi is also able to give his kids, Dina and Rob, the creative freedom he never had under his own father, allowing them to create wines in their own styles, with more blending of grape varietals, under the Emblem label. Michael, meanwhile, offers his stricter cabernet interpretation under the name M by Michael Mondavi; the new wine from Animo is a collaboration between the generations.

The rocky, volcanic soil that produces Animo and M by Michael Mondavi requires lots of compost and care. According to Mondavi, the hillside's smaller grapes have more concentrated flavor and create more interesting wines. “In the next decade or two, the greatest wines in Napa and possibly the world will be produced on the hillside in Napa Valley,” he says.

If Mondavi has anything to say about it, his family will be right there in the thick of it. —*AMBER GIBSON*