

Oral History Center  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Margrit Mondavi

Margrit Mondavi on Wine, Food, Culture, and Napa Valley

Interviews conducted by  
Martin Meeker  
in 2015

Copyright © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

\*\*\*\*\*

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Margrit Mondavi dated January 22, 2016. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/cite.html>

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Margrit Mondavi "Margrit Mondavi on Wine, Food, Culture, and Napa Valley" conducted by Martin Meeker in 2015, Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2016.



Margrit Mondavi

**Margit Mondavi** was born in Switzerland in 1925 and raised in northern Italy. She married an American serviceman who brought her to the United States in the 1950s. In the early 1960s, they moved to Napa Valley, where her life's work would really begin. She joined Charles Krug winery (owned by the Mondavi family) as a tour guide and, while there, pioneered the presentation of performances at the winery. She followed Robert Mondavi when he left Krug and started his own winery. A budding romance followed and she eventually married Mondavi in 1980. In this interview, Margrit Mondavi discusses her contributions to the development of wine education, marketing, and sales; she also discusses her combined interests in wine, food, and the arts, and how she brought those together at the winery.

## Table of Contents—Margrit Mondavi

Interview 1: September 28, 2015	1
---------------------------------	---

Birth in Switzerland in 1925; upbringing and family background – Father was a homeopath; the family garden – Mother’s cooking – Education – The Arts – Marriage to an American, move to the United States and then to Napa Valley – Earliest memories of Napa Valley – Discovering California wine – Learning to talk about wine – Working at Charles Krug winery as tour guide; cultural performances at the winery – Teaching Americans about wine in the 1960s – Women in the wine industry: Lili Hsi-Thomas, Michaela Rodeno, Zelma Long; as a mentor to other women in Napa Valley – Leaving Charles Krug winery – Robert Mondavi sets out on his own; beginning of romance with Robert Mondavi – Restaurant culture in 1960s and 1970s Napa Valley – The Great Chefs series at Robert Mondavi Winery: Michael James and Billy Cross; Jean Troisgros, Michel Guérard, Paul Bocuse – Serving as translator at the winery – Reflecting on great Napa Valley wines – Personal approach to cooking and food

Interview 2: November 2, 2015	23
-------------------------------	----

The wine community in Napa; tasting, critiquing, learning; “Robert Mondavi University” – Shifting tastes in wine; cult wines; Mondavi’s “classical style” – Working as a tour guide at Robert Mondavi Winery; from informal to formal tours – Art, and the relationship between wine and the arts; presenting the arts at Robert Mondavi Winery – Tasting rooms and tasting fees; rise of wine tourism; promoting California wines – Philanthropy: Napa Valley Symphony, local charities, UC Davis; Robert Mondavi Institute for Food and Wine Science; Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts; Copia – Retail sales at Mondavi – Mondavi’s wine philosophy; wine prices and types – Approach to philanthropy – Continuing interest in Napa Valley wines and dining – The To Kalon vineyard – Continuity and change in Napa Valley – Changing role of women in the wine industry

## Interview 1: September 28, 2015

01-00:00:4

Meeker: Today is the thirteenth of October, 2015. This is Martin Meeker, interviewing Margrit Mondavi, at her home outside of Napa, California. This is interview session number one. So, the way that we begin every single interview that we do is by asking our interviewee to say when and where they were born, so when and where were you born?

01-00:01:15

Mondavi: I was born in Switzerland, on the second of August, 1925.

01-00:01:22

Meeker: And can you tell me a little bit about the family that you were born into. Maybe the kind of work that your parents did.

01-00:01:28

Mondavi: Yes. My parents were kind of bohemians. They were Swiss Germans, both from a canton called Appenzell, and they decided after a few foggy winters, they would move to the southern part of Switzerland, like the expats moved to Provence. And so in the twenties, so the time that I was born, they moved down to the canton Ticino, by the Lago Maggiore, and that's where I grew up in essence, yes.

01-00:02:11

Meeker: What kind of work did your father do?

01-00:02:13

Mondavi: My father was a homeopath, yes. He made medicine out of natural products.

01-00:02:22

Meeker: And was your mother a homemaker?

01-00:02:25

Mondavi: She was a homemaker, but also quite a liberated woman, that the things that were early for her time. She also raised us quite liberally, freely, and we had a

wonderful youth, in this, you know the Ticino, by the Lago Maggiore, had a great climate. It was kind of like here in California. We had palm trees and tropical plants and this beautiful lake, and that leaves you an impression. We were, you know, when I think of where we lived, which was probably a good half hour, as little children, we walked down to the lake, swam for two hours and walked back up to the house. It was very free.

We had a little bit of a vineyard around the house, and as I told you before, it was a total disaster. My father, every year, insisted on making some wine from, this was probably *vitis labrusca*, and we handpicked the grapes, and this was usually about October, and by March, it was all thrown out, it never succeeded. But every year he made wine, and we had wine with our meals, even as children, a half a glass, and as we grew, we could go up to a glass. Wine was part of our celebration and life, I felt it was, everybody would have that. I was very surprised then, later on, when it was pointed out that, you know, in America, you shouldn't drink before this and that and so forth. But, in spite of these warnings, we had wine at home—there wouldn't be a meal that we didn't have a little glass of wine.

Wine was also discussed. My father was a great aficionado of Bourgogne wines. It was closer to the region of Switzerland that he came from. He would discuss where those wines came from, and also knew a lot about Beaujolais, and it was just lovely to grow up knowing a little about wine.

01-00:05:29

Meeker: So the wine that you were drinking was not just local wine.

01-00:05:34

Mondavi: No, no.

01-00:05:33

Meeker: It was coming from the broader area.

01-00:05:35

Mondavi: He had a cellar, and I wish you had seen this cellar. It was a big hole in the rock, but the bottles stayed just the right temperature and he knew where every one was, and for special occasions, brought out a special bottle, which was then discussed regionally, and also the grape variety. I just grew up with wine. Then later on, I went to school in the French part of Switzerland, which again is a wine country, and it would have been totally unheard of not to have wine for special occasions and a little bit for the meal, yes.

I came into a wineless existence when I married an American from North Dakota.

01-00:06:39

Meeker: When you were younger, did you start to develop the ability to discern amongst different kinds of wine? Did you develop a taste for some wines over the others?

01-00:06:50

Mondavi: In a very gross way, I could maybe distinguish a Beaujolais and a Burgundy, but really not in the researched, academic way.

01-00:07:07

Meeker: You said your father was a homeopath. Did he grow his own herbs?

01-00:07:11

Mondavi: Yes, yes.

01-00:07:12

Meeker: And did your mother keep, like a kitchen garden?

01-00:07:16

Mondavi: Well, it was more than that. They dried these herbs and they made medicines that they sold. You know, it was they make their living out of this, yes.

01-00:07:30

Meeker: And so were you taught about gardening and maintaining a garden?



01-00:07:32

Mondavi: Yes, yes, definitely.

01-00:07:36

Meeker: Do you recall what some of those lessons were, that were passed on to you?

01-00:07:40

Mondavi: Well for one thing, much before you talk about everything organic and biological, they were totally organic and biological, you know, and knew a lot about the herbs. They were designed for certain diseases, and my father kept a big log on it, and he wrote the people that asked for his advice. So I grew up in a biological environment and amongst those herbs and so forth, there were also grapes sometimes. They were discussed, yes, yes.

01-00:08:31

Meeker: Were there fruits and vegetables grown as well?

01-00:08:33

Mondavi: Well, you know at the time, the grapes that we were growing, very common, it was Gattinara and Nostrano, were very common. Everybody had a little of that, but it was still part of the culture, you know?

01-00:09:00

Meeker: What kind of food did your mother cook?

01-00:09:03

Mondavi: The best in the world. [both chuckle] She was a fabulous cook. Her palate went a little more towards French, because that's where she grew up with her mother. Then of course, everybody adopts a little Italian cuisine, which we are surrounded by, and it was so delicious. I think today, everything was totally organic. When you wanted a fruit, you went to the apple tree. It was a different life.

I had to go to elementary school 500 steps up, and you came home at lunch, 500 steps down, and then went back at two o'clock, 500 steps up. Later on, for high school at the Lyceum, we reversed it, we had to go down first and up

after. Later on in life, I kind of, you know, just did it, deduct it. We were such healthy children, but we were constantly running up and down 500 stairs, you know, and if you wanted something you went on foot. You just imagine, it was also during the war.

01-00:10:58

Meeker: At your high school, the Lyceum, tell me are there any teachers that you remember in particular?

01-00:11:09

Mondavi: Very much so. Teachers are very formative in my life. I had hoped that I would go on in school, but I was the girl, you know, and at home, mamma and grandma and whoever, dedicate, or dictated our lives. They said well, you know, you're not going to send the girl to university, she's going to get married anyway. And if you, at twenty-four, were not married in my time, you were an old maid. We went to a very good Lyceum, a high school, and then came the separation where you would have to go to university, and that's when my parents said, "No, the girl is not going."

So, I studied in my school, at the school, *La Majeure*, and also went to a French school near Montreux, and studied French there, a little bit of that culture, and then I met an American and when I was twenty-one, we got married and I moved to South Dakota, and that was a major move, believe me.

01-00:12:44

Meeker: You were a young woman when World War II was raging throughout Europe. How did that affect your life?

01-00:12:55

Mondavi: Really, you know, you adapt to everything, and when you're a child especially, but it was a hard time. Like for instance, especially in institutions, you had three or four meatless days a week. Your materials, even basic materials for school, were now reduced to, you know, wooden things. There was absolutely no entertaining, there was no travel, and there was a constant

fear, we were always afraid. We were afraid for the Nazis up north, the fascists down south. We were always afraid, and that was a normal thing that you had to be thankful for whatever you got that day because tomorrow may not come around. My father knew that the Nazis were coming down in parachutes, you know. Yes.

01-00:14:10

Meeker: Were there soldiers who came through your village?

01-00:14:13

Mondavi: There were, yeah. Everything in Switzerland was mobilized and we had also, sometimes immigrants, like Polish people, that were interned in Switzerland, and then my father and mother invited them for Sunday dinner. No, we were—it was a different time. Then, in June of '45, the war was over!

01-00:14:47

Meeker: Did the allied troops come to your village?

01-00:14:50

Mondavi: At that time, yes, in '45, allied troops came.

01-00:14:55

Meeker: Were there celebrations?

01-00:14:56

Mondavi: Great celebrations, yeah, great celebrations.

01-00:15:02

Meeker: I know that the house that you're living in now is filled with all kinds of beautiful art, and I know later on the performing arts become very important in your life. When and how were you first introduced to the arts?

01-00:15:16

Mondavi: Well, it was just that my parents had great taste, and when they got something it was beautiful. Maybe not of the high quality that I have here at the moment, but it was beautiful. We were schlepped to museums and galleries and conscious of art, but you must also imagine that there was very little to see

and do during the way, because you didn't really travel, see? You were really a prisoner in that little Switzerland, and in the north were the Germans and in the south were the fascists. So, we had no chance, and for the first time that I traveled was when I married my American husband and he took me to South Dakota, which was not exactly the cultural center of the world, and changed my life.

01-00:16:22

Meeker: So you said that after you married your American husband.

01-00:16:29

Mondavi: Philip, yeah.

01-00:16:30

Meeker: Philip. That was the beginning of a wineless experience of your life.

01-00:16:33

Mondavi: Well, obviously, later on, wine came in it, but in South Dakota, you didn't find wine. No, it came later. It came when we moved to Napa in '61.

01-00:16:51

Meeker: So I know that because he was in the military, you lived in many different places across the globe.

01-00:16:56

Mondavi: Yes.

01-00:16:57

Meeker: Including places like Japan, and I think Germany, right?

01-00:17:01

Mondavi: Through the Army, we traveled, yes.

01-00:17:06

Meeker: Were there any of those places that you went to that were particularly interesting to you?

01-00:17:12

Mondavi: Well, you know, especially wine. I remember Germany became very interesting. They had those wonderful Rieslings and Traminers and so forth, and the Germans had still accrued some wines from older times and in fortunate times, I was able to taste some. Yeah, I was conscious of wine, but the real consciousness came with Napa.

01-00:17:46

Meeker: Well, let's talk about Napa. Why don't you tell me the first time you came to Napa Valley and what your memories are of that first experience.

01-00:18:00

Mondavi: Well, when we first came, we actually came as tourists, visiting friends, and it was wonderful, that in April, it was so green and that there were vineyards. I always said it smelled like my home in the Ticino, of lavender and of cut grass and of vineyards. It was just wonderful, this valley, and then it produced grapes. The first year, the big surprise, we learned that they have varieties that are good, that we could take them off the vine and taste them and say, "Oh, this is different than this." And then of course, the winemaking and pretty soon, the process of working in a winery and becoming a hundred percent inflamed about this new venture, and learning, yes, taking lessons from the Wine Library, or some extension courses, and just learning every day. I was totally enamored.

01-00:19:30

Meeker: Do you recall when you learned that California had the potential to make great wine?

01-00:19:37

Mondavi: Pretty soon, because we tasted wines and bought some wines and traded some wines, and pretty soon, you realized that this is not just casual, that the quality was there and we preferred this wine to that wine. I remember one time, a bottle of Mayacamas Chardonnay, and we paid three dollars for it. [laughs] And then afterwards, we said it was worth it, wasn't it, and so learned. And

then tour wineries, of course I got to taste the dregs and everything else. There's a reason that Robert [Mondavi] spent all that money building that winery. Yes.

01-00:28:46

Meeker: In those early years, before you started to work for Robert Mondavi, do you recall the wineries that were producing the good wine, that you would go back to time and again?

01-00:21:02

Mondavi: Well, you were surrounded, you know, and with Robert Mondavi, there was always comparative tasting, so you were surrounded by other wines too. It was a fact of life, that you looked for the best if you could, and once in a while, a specific bottle would pop up and Bob would keep a little bit and say, "Margrit, come on it, I've got something for you." Maybe it wasn't justified, but I started to say, I can speak with some of the winemakers, I can taste some of these wines, I know what's mediocre and what's really wonderful. So, I felt myself, you know, I said this is a wonderful vocation, a vocation that I never expected.

01-00:22:13

Meeker: Were you able to start to put into words, what you considered to be a memorable wine?

01-00:2:22

Mondavi: When we had those comparative tastings, sometimes I spoke up, I've already talked a lot of rubbish. But still no, I just felt part of the community now, and then suddenly, in the middle of one of those very serious tastings, someone would come up and say, "Margrit, your tour is waiting for you," and so run out and give a tour. There's no better way to express yourself, you know, to really communicate, and then to go out and talk with these people and really tell them what you felt about, and then taste together. Yes, it was a wonderful, wonderful, new way of life, and supported by Robert Mondavi, who never let you go.

01-00:23:23

Meeker: Wine is a hard thing to talk about. It's a little like talking about art, that you kind of have to experience it firsthand, because our language doesn't quite— How did you learn to talk about it?

01-00:23:42

Mondavi: Well, for one thing, with Bob it was always so, you tell them how you feel it, you tell the truth, don't make up words, don't make up things. Do it as it is and then when you taste the wine, talk about it, write it down, don't forget it, don't forget it, you know, very difficult.

01-00:24:10

Meeker: I know that you started working at Charles Krug very early on, after you moved here, in '61, right? Tell me about how it was that you got a job at Charles Krug.

01-00:24:26

Mondavi: Because I was a member of a group called Young Audiences, which is a group that tries to bring music to elementary schools, you know maybe explain to a child, what is an oboe or what does a director do when he has that many musicians. And we of course never had money, so we decided to give a little thing and make a little money. I remember, I brought my upright piano from my house, and we did it all ourselves, you know? And about a group of people came and paid a little something for this wonderful presentation, and then I packed it all up again, took it home. Then, this PR person at Charles Krug, called me and said, "Hey, Margrit, come on out, how would you like to work for us?" "Me, work for you?"

So I went out and had this long conversation and ended up by having a real job, and this is how I started to give tours. Mr. Bartlett would just say no, no, just go out and give a tour. You have been on tour with all these guys and they're not so good anyway, but you go out and give a tour, and that's how I started you know. Just, what do you do, you imitate, right? You try to figure it out and then you imitate, and I listened to them and I imitated, and then after a

few months, people would say oh, you should have a tour by Margaret Biever, she gives a great tour. See, I suddenly got myself a name. Half of it, I made up, [laughs] I'm sure, but very positively.

01-00:26:43

Meeker: At Charles Krug, when you gave these tours, do you recall some of the things that you liked to talk about?

01-00:26:51

Mondavi: Well, I liked to talk about the vineyards, the passion for wine, the flavor for wine, and also, giving the idea of the people that came that didn't drink wine, to tell them look, it's a complement. You're making a feast out of a meal. You can do something yes, if there's leftovers, and it's going to be good, and so I just made it up, you know, and pretty soon it was part of my repertoire and they liked it. I was very dramatic, you know, I went out there and told them what to do about wine, yeah.

Then, as I went on to Robert Mondavi [Winery], I started to realize that I could do it, I knew more and I could do it. A wonderful thing that happened at the time was too, that when some of the important people came, Robert would call me and say, you talk to them and so forth. You know, I am sure he would do the same, he would get the wine and we would be a family.

01-00:28:17

Meeker: Do you remember the tours being a bit like a performance?

01-00:28:21

Mondavi: Like a performance? Oh, definitely, oh definitely, absolutely. Some of them were really [laughs] all fake, but most of them very real though, I'm not making it up. Most of them, they're real, but there was a bit of a performance, yes. The tour guides that I observed, that worked for us, the ones that gave the best tours gave the best performance.



01-00:28:58

Meeker: I imagine, at that point in time, when you were at Krug, and then at Mondavi in the early years, the people who came on the tours, the Americans, probably didn't know that much about wine.

01-00:29:12

Mondavi: That's an important question. No, you had a very innocent group that you talked about wine, and sometimes you got really innocent questions, you know, and respond.

01-00:29:27

Meeker: Like what? What kind of questions would you get?

01-00:29:31

Mondavi: Well, what kind of wine would you use when you cook, you know? And I would say just anything that's open, a dry wine, and then they would say isn't there cooking wine? Oh, funny things, you know. You have to start with saying there's red and white wine and why you would have the red wine and why you would have the white wine. By then, we had figured out stories, and they were very well studied and true, but you had to somehow convince this new audience that there was something behind it, and we did, we did. And then it was of course easier, when we started to have performances, that music was part of it, that art was part of it, that cuisine was part of it. We did the cooking schools and so forth. By then, it was all easy.

01-00:30:45

Meeker: So, when you were hired at Krug, as a tour guide, I believe you were the first woman in the valley to have that role. I think now, probably the majority of tour guides are probably women.

01-00:31:03

Mondavi: I think so.

01-00:31:06

Meeker: Did you feel like there was ample opportunity for women in wineries?

01-00:1:13

Mondavi: Well, obviously, we were considered the newcomers, and often, I guess one of the directors that would get a man, and say no this tour, but that disappeared soon. In my case, I realized that we had women that emerged that were stars. They gave wonderful tours, they told wonderful stories. At that time, we were also judged over how much wine you sold, and they sold the wine right off the shelf. No, no, we soon had a place, the women had a place.

01-00:32:18

Meeker: Why do you think women were so successful as tour guides and in sales, perhaps even more so than the men were.

01-00:32:28

Mondavi: That is a very good question. For one thing, I think a woman is charming, a woman tells a good story. I'm just putting a parade of the women that as I say, I put in that star role, and that's pretty much yeah, charming.

01-00:33:07

Meeker: Can you remember some of these women for me?

01-00:33:11

Mondavi: Yes, yes.

01-00:33:12

Meeker: Their names, and maybe tell me a little about them.

01-00:33:15

Mondavi: Let me see now, Lili Hsi-Thomas—she still is in Napa Valley and she tells a wonderful story. Then was Gretchen, but I forgot her last name, she told a wonderful story. Well, then you must imagine the women in other wineries that tell the story. Michaela Rodeno from St. Supéry, a wonderful storyteller.

01-00:34:05

Meeker: When did you start to see women move beyond, you know, the hospitality part of the wine industry?

01-00:34:11

Mondavi: I would say sort of early, mid-seventies, yes, yes, and once they had achieved a certain level, you know, that they told a good story, that they had a good tour and so forth, they just improved – some women even schlepped hoses in the cellar!

01-00:34:32

Meeker: Because I know Michaela Rodeno went into the wine business, and I know some, like Zelma Long, started in the lab and then went into winemaking.

01-00:34:45

Mondavi: Well, you know Zelma had it all. So, no, I think that pretty soon, when they started to know the story, and by the story I mean that they could answer questions, you know, they found their places.

01-00:35:00

Meeker: You know, I imagine by the late sixties, early seventies, you were well-known and well-respected at Mondavi and in the valley overall. Did women ever come to you seeking advice?

01-00:35:27

Mondavi: Oh yes, oh yes, didn't they, Zelma [to Zelma Long, seated in the room]? They wanted to know how to succeed and find a place in the wine world, what would help them to get a better job, what should they do, maybe to progress in this whole business. We had many sessions, and somebody that always gave advice straight on, without compliments, was Robert Mondavi. He was 100 percent honest, he just said this is it and I suggest you do it, and go for it, don't be afraid.

01-00:36:15

Meeker: When women came to you seeking this advice, were there specific things you would tell them?

01-00:36:29

Mondavi: Well obviously, you kind of knew a little bit, where they wanted to go, and if it was just very open, you would ask them if the world was your oyster, what

would you like? I then started to think back and say look what has happened. There were no women anywhere, now we have winemakers, we have winery owners, you know? It has changed, yeah. Think of what we have today. You said half of the tour guides are women, but the winery owners, the proprietors, the people that are really deeply involved in winemaking, all of that is relatively new, in twenty years. Zelma, would you say twenty to thirty years?

01-00:37:37

Meeker: You know, it sounds to me that the advice you were giving was know what your dreams were and just pursue those. Don't take no for an answer, maybe.

01-00:37:55

Mondavi: Yes, and learn as much as you can and follow this and this and this person, and read this and this book, and just proceed by studying and being with the people that have been successful, because not everybody is, but if they're successful, they'll get promoted.

01-00:38:28

Meeker: I imagine you know of, say leaders in the valley, who were more receptive to women, and some leaders who were less receptive to women.

01-00:38:41

Mondavi: Well, I was just thinking, you know, if somebody like Michaela Rodeno, that became a president of the company, she certainly did it. There were obviously steps in which she was helped, but in general, she did it. The winemakers too, they had to work, and we had comparative tastings, and we had the people from [University of California] Davis. We were very, very blessed, and no more maybe with the tasting wheel [developed by Professor Ann Noble] or you know, whatever invention there was. They spoke and they gave a little of their knowledge, and you accumulate. I was out there and I said look, if you want to do something, for one thing have an idea. Have an idea and then follow it and get as much help as you can.

01-00:40:11

Meeker: Before we started recording, you were telling me about when you left Charles Krug, and then shortly thereafter, you joined the Robert Mondavi Winery. Tell me a little bit about why you left Charles Krug.

01-00:40:32

Mondavi: You know, we all left Charles Krug. When Bob and Peter [Mondavi] split, the spirit was going from Charles Krug, and all the top people that was part of him, left Charles Krug. And then strangely enough, when I started again, down at Robert Mondavi, I had the same people that I had at Charles Krug, because they all came down. It was, in a way very funny. It was again, the same ones that said, whatever has this world gone to? Since when does a woman know anything about wine? Look at this, Robert Mondavi hired another woman, or something like that, you know. He hired the Bernsteins, so Arlene was another one. I'm now thinking, we had about four or five women, and we did a good job.

01-00:41:50

Meeker: When Robert Mondavi was building his winery, that's obviously still there today, it was sort of controversial. It was a new chapter in the history of Napa Valley. When you saw it being built, do you remember what you thought?

01-00:42:15

Mondavi: Well, obviously I was for it, and I was very much for his idea, and helped him and went along with him, and that made it fun. Then, you know, what you know, what you don't talk about, of course I married the boss, so there is a little in that story too.

01-00:42:47

Meeker: There was a romance blossoming.

01-00:42:48

Mondavi: There was, yes. And as you know, if you are observing in life, that romance thing helps a lot. But, that wasn't all. We certainly saw alike, saw alike, yes.

01-00:43:13

Meeker: When you say you saw alike, can you tell me more about what you mean?

01-00:43:17

Mondavi: Well, you know, progressively—now I'm talking about the winery and I'd say look, we could have a culinary school here, all we needed to do was make a corridor between this and that, and he would listen, he would listen, and then he would say what he thought about it and in general, we would do it, maybe adjust it a little bit. I had total support, you know, that's important. Remember, total support is important, and you seldom get it, you seldom get total support. Zelma, did you get total support?

01-00:44:07

Long: Absolutely, Margrit.

01-00:44:13

Meeker: You know, at the time Mondavi opened, in 1966, what was the restaurant and food culture like in Napa Valley?

01-00:44:25

Mondavi: Well, for one thing, there wasn't any. We had one restaurant in Yountville, that was one, Domaine Chandon, that had a good cuisine [and opened in 1976]. Then, I think it was in the 80s, Piatti opened in Yountville, and that was the culture, and whatever the other restaurants, it was still hamburgers and minestrone, you know. But it caught on quickly and wine had a lot to do with it. I remember going to a restaurant and always watching how many wines there were on the tables, who ordered, you know? Yeah. Then, the better restaurants came along and people came from everywhere, but wine was also there, very importantly.

Did you ever hear the story, Zelma, when, at Piattis, the next table above our table, the next table, we're all discussing what wine should we order, and Bob suddenly said, "Why don't you order a Jack Cakebread, he makes good wine

you know.” He could have said why don’t you order a Robert Mondavi. But that’s how he was always.

01-00:46:11

Meeker:

What role did Robert Mondavi Winery play in the emergence of a real food culture in Napa?

01-00:46:20

Mondavi:

Oh, I would say he played a big role, because it was the idea of having the Great Chefs, for one thing was very expensive, and so he decided he would go with it. Wine and food at the time, was really big, and when I said that it’s too bad we don’t have—I wish I had a little calendar of all the little cooking schools in Napa Valley. It was the big style. I can think of at least four of them, and you know, a couple of women got together, they hired a little kitchen and they started to cook, and with the cooking of course came the wine. So you know, it was there. Nancy Sellers and Emily Didler were two of them and Belle Rhodes and the Trefethens always had a cooking school. You know, it was good stuff. Then, we went big time. We installed the Great Chefs and this made a big difference, and it’s still talked about. This was again, to have the best cooks of the world, with the best wine of the world, and then talk about it.

01-00:48:15

Meeker:

Right. The Great Chefs brought out Jean Troisgros, they brought out Paul Bocuse, I mean these are the most amazing chefs of the twentieth century. Tell me about the Great Chefs program. How did it get started?

01-00:48:20

Mondavi:

Well, two fellows came to the door, Michael James and Billy Cross, and they always came to see me, and said they had an idea, they had an idea of a cooking school. They were going to bring great chefs from the world, guests were going to stay for a week. So we started to talk about it and finally adopted it, adopted the Great Chefs, and it was successful and people stayed

for a week and cooked with these chefs. There was, as you said, there was Jean Troisgros, there was Michel Guérard, Paul Bocuse and the whole three star group, and it worked both ways, because most of these great chefs had really never had a California wine, and so for the first time, they were exposed to California, which they said, “Oh, we went to California!” And then they found the wine good and all twenty-four chefs took their wines to France, every one of them, even just six bottles. But it was the beginning of an exchange again, of something, that I was fortunate sometimes, to play a role, because of the language and so forth. It was wonderful. So here we had suddenly, the best of the best in the French culinary artistry, that would serve California wine. Good.

01-00:50:04

Meeker: Tell me about the role you played.

01-00:50:09

Mondavi: I usually had to translate in the kitchen and then have a liaison with the chefs, and then a friendship, and then it continued on. As they went back to France, maybe we would go and visit. No, it was a wonderful relationship, in some cases still exists. This happens everywhere now, they’re getting too old. Paul Prudhomme just died.

01-00:50:41

Meeker: Right. But all of these people left an indelible mark.

01-00:50:45

Mondavi: An image, yeah.

01-00:50:48

Meeker: Did you take any of the classes?

01-00:50:51

Mondavi: I took them all. I took them all because in general, I had to translate. I don’t know if any of these chefs spoke English, you know, maybe a few words.



You know, you never learn as much as when you are translating, because you have to pay attention.

01-00:51:15

Meeker: Do you recall any particular methods or exceptional dishes that you learned while you were engaging with these great chefs?

01-00:51:25

Mondavi: Well, the thing that I think was the big message is that they appreciated California wines for the first time, and would maybe say something about it, and during the dinners Bob would explain the wines.

01-00:51:43

Meeker: Were just Mondavi wines served at these events?

01-00:51:45

Mondavi: No, no, no. We went all over the board, money was no object. You wanted a Chateau Latour, go to the closet and get it. Bob was very expansive, he had no reservations and such good taste.

01-00:52:08

Meeker: He liked the good things.

01-00:52:09

Mondavi: He liked the good things and he likes to show it. He even allowed Zelma to open some great bottles, right?

01-00:52:18

Long: That was wonderful.

01-00:52:22

Meeker: What were your favorite wines in Napa, to drink? Did you develop any favorites?

01-00:52:28

Mondavi: Well, at the time, at the time my story was, I still go for Cabernet Sauvignon. I thought that was great. Today, you know, my tastes have changed a little, and I appreciate a lot of good Pinot Noirs.

01-00:52:48

Meeker: What were your favorite producers of Cabernet back in the 1970s?

01-00:52:54

Mondavi: What were my favorite producers? There was a lot of good wines. Maybe one time, Francis Coppola brought a bottle, a hundred year-old bottle of Inglenook Charbono that he dug out of his cellar, and it was a remarkable wine. So many, so many.

01-00:53:37

Meeker: I imagine it's hard to pull out one bottle after this time, yeah. Why don't you tell me about, you know, in addition to the Great Chefs program, I know that you started doing some cooking at the winery, for lunches, and those meetings, and that kind of stuff. Tell me about what you brought to the winery as far as your cooking.

01-00:54:05

Mondavi: My cooking was simple. I think my guests usually cackled, because they got so much chicken! It started that Bob would send the secretaries to Pomettas and they brought a plate of cold cuts that were god awful, you know, cold salami and cold cuts. So one day I said, "Mr. Mondavi, would you mind if I would cook you a chicken, so you don't have to serve these cold cuts?" It's a very big mistake, because it's then I cooked. So I just would make something, and put a roast or a chicken in the oven and make a salad. I think I left an imprint, I did a lot of cooking, yes. But then Bob said no, you can't cook any more, and that was that. You know, in these early days we did everything. Something needed to be done and you said okay, you put on an apron and do it, and it was fun. Later on my daughter Annie took on the executive chef position.

01-00:55:24

Meeker: Not all good cooking needs to be like *nouvelle cuisine*, right?

01-00:55:29

Mondavi: No, no, no, no.

01-00:55:31

Meeker: It can be very simple.

01-00:55:32

Mondavi: Right, right.

## Interview 2: November 2, 2015

02-00:00:03

Meeker: All right, today is November 2, 2015. This is Martin Meeker, interviewing Margrit Mondavi, and this is interview session number two. We're at her home here up in the hills, outside of the town of Napa. So let's get started, okay?

02-00:00:24

Mondavi: Okay, Martin.

02-00:00:27

Meeker: The last time, you had told me and talked just a little bit about this group of people who would get together regularly and taste wine and talk about wine, and I think everyone wants to know more about that group of people. Maybe start off by telling me some of the other people who were part of this group.

02-00:00:53

Mondavi: Well, this group was actually motivated, or let me say generated, by the winery, winemaking team, and especially like for instance, if we were harvesting that particular vineyard and they were there too, it was random. Then, my husband pulled it together and as he was always interested in everything and generous, he would immediately go to the closet and open some comparative wines of great class, be it from France or Italy. It was blind tasting, we had paper bags over the bottles, you know, and blind tasting is difficult. You just kind of look at the shape of that paper bag and hope that will tell you a little something. Maybe it's a German wine, a little brown sprouting out. Cheating is very common. [laughs] Anything we could that gives this away a little bit would be used. First, the wines were tried to be guessed. Then they were explained by Bob, and if a particular—was there, that person would give us his opinion on it. And then the wines were compared with what we had on the table and well, it was almost sometimes argumentative, somebody preferred this, somebody preferred that, but it was very, very instructive. The wines were left on the table, so the people that

were participating or anyway were in the group, could stay and just tear those wines apart. So that, I think was one of the most interesting and instructive events we had as far as wine-tasting was.

Robert Mondavi also, whenever guests came or whenever there was an occasion to open a bottle of wine and to discuss it, would then always grab another one, a similar one, but usually of high quality and distinction, and discussion would emerge wherever we were. We were very into comparative tasting.

02-00:03:43

Meeker: This sounds almost like an academic or a scholarly setting.

02-00:03:48

Mondavi: Yes, we called it Robert Mondavi University, yes. And it went on, it kind of dissipated in the last years, but as long as Bob was there and he wanted to participate, it was serious.

02-00:04:09

Meeker: Was there also a *joie de vivre* around it? Was it fun as well as instructive?

02-00:04:15

Mondavi: I thought it was great fun. I thought it was great fun, and you had to have a little sense of humor here too, to really get through this half academic, half friendship, you know? Whatever was available. No, no, it was great fun.

02-00:04:42

Meeker: Would you say that a community was built up around these kinds of events?

02-00:04:49

Mondavi: Well, anybody that was ever around and was invited, and many were, will not forget those tastings. You brought out a factor that was certainly part of it. It was that you had to have a little good sense of humor, especially when you took the brown bag off the bottle. Oh! We were all wrong! You know, that kind of thing.

02-00:05:23

Meeker: A great deal has been made out of both the changing tastes of the consumer, but also the changing style of winemaking in Napa Valley. You moved, I think, from wines that are lower in alcohol, more food friendly, to in the 1980s and 1990s a very different style of wine.

02-00:05:46

Mondavi: Yes. Well, you know in the eighties especially, we were very influenced by Robert Parker. It was also a time of something that we don't talk about it any more, cult wines. Remember cult wines?

02-00:06:07

Meeker: Sure, the Harlans and the Screaming Eagles.

02-00:06:08

Mondavi: Yes, yes. So, that was used very much as determining a wine that was fashionable, and that's when obviously, lots of wines were made for the taste of at least in this case, the Jupiter of wines, which was Robert Parker.

02-00:06:35

Meeker: Right. Did your tastes shift over this time?

02-00:06:45

Mondavi: Well, I think we all did somehow, try to find the essence of these wines that then brought the high money, you know? It was high alcohol concentration and a style, a style that was not—but Bob went away from that. He always said these wines are too, this and that, too that; "I'm going to stay with my elegant wines." But the general trend and the people that brought wines to these tastings, was to come together on these concentrated wines, they were concentrated, yes. Zelma [Long] can probably tell you some of that truth from the winemaker standpoint. But Bob held steady and I think his wine showed that he tried to maintain the elegance and his classical style. [break in audio] So, yeah, so we did undergo this kind of metamorphosis, which is very much something that you must discuss with Zelma, because suddenly there are new gurus.

02-00:08:58

Meeker: Well, it's interesting. Of course I'm interested in speaking with winemakers about this, but something I'm beginning to learn is that the transformation of taste, to this new style of wine, was not universal, that there remained people like yourself and Bob Mondavi, who still appreciated finesse.

02-00:09:25

Mondavi: Yes, yes, and this is true, that the winemakers of class maintained their style, but the trend was towards big stuff. We're talking mostly Cabernet Sauvignon.

02-00:09:53

Meeker: How long did you work as a tour guide until, at Mondavi?

02-00:09:58

Mondavi: Well, I think I still am. [both laugh] I always say once a tour guide, always a tour guide. As long as I was at the winery, if there were people that I knew, like relatives or friends of the winery, or somebody that my husband introduced me to, I would give a tour. They would have to put up with me.

02-00:10:28

Meeker: Can you tell me how your wine tours changed over the years? Were there certain new points that you'd like to add?

02-00:10:35

Mondavi: They changed, they changed. Well, for one thing, Martin, you know the winery changed because we changed equipment, we changed winemaking, we changed vineyard management, you know? As a matter of fact, I was thinking about it. In the early years, the first tours that we gave, the gondolas were outside, full of grapes, and one of the guys, one of the attendants would come by with two cups of sulfur dioxide and sprinkle the whole thing with sulfur, and we would explain that this was to maintain the freshness and so forth, like it was a great advantage, you know, and so forth. Obviously, that left us

We would also tell funny stories. I know the crushing appeared, started right away, and then somebody would say oh, did you see, there was a flip-flop in there. Or did you watch, and we would very openly discuss that bad leaves, bugs, maybe somebody left their scissors, you know? It was the joke of it.

02-00:12:13

Meeker: Maybe a snake or two.

02-00:12:15

Mondavi: Yeah. We were much more casual.

02-00:12:25

Meeker: So, what happens is over the years, things become more formal.

02-00:12:31

Mondavi: Formal, and I would think we were much more careful. This thing about flip-flops, I don't know if that would have gone very far. And there was of course, much more human involvement, you know, how the tanks were cleaned, that people went inside and took a chance. It was more hands-on, real. Then of course, we learned more and more, and we learned also, what to say. You're not going to say that, you know?

I always remember when we went around, taking each other's tours at Beringers, they had this story that they were losing about one-third of their whole wine because of an old oak tree that drank it up through the roots, you know? That's only one of those many stories. And then also, there were especially—and I don't want to now bring in other wineries, but there were family stories and things that you wanted or didn't want to tell. We were much more casual.

02-00:14:15

Meeker: I want to switch gears just a little bit. I think last time we talked a little bit about art. I know that art is a lifelong passion of yours.

02-00:14:27

Mondavi: Yes.



02-00:14:29

Meeker: As somebody who's appreciated it, somebody who's collected it, and somebody who is an artist in your own right. I'm curious, if you can tell me how you see the relationship between wine and art.

02-00:14:49

Mondavi: All right. For one thing, art is my passion. Bob knew nothing about art, but always, Bob liked to learn and to admire and I schlepped him to museums, and he started to appreciate. The idea that we would have art and the art of winemaking, together in our vineyard, came early on, and he let me go, and I picked artists, had shows. At that time, it took very little to get a little publicity, you know? There weren't that many news, but I would maybe write to Pierce Carson and the guy at the *St. Helena Star*, George Starke, and a few others, that I was going to have an art show on May third, by this and this artist, and it was open from three to five and good wines were going to be served, with some hors d'oeuvres, and people came, and that's what Bob wanted. I was always there and when I saw the most people, which was probably, if it was from three to five, it was at four o'clock. I would kind of stop for a moment and tell them what we were doing and talk about the artist, and if I was fortunate, the artist was there, and it was just natural. The art stayed up for two months and whoever came for this or that reason, was exposed to it. It was something that Bob incorporated too, that wine is a form of art and we like to integrate the two. It formed a great alliance. The same with the musical presentation. When I first did the little festival on two bits, we saw that people came, and we were able to expand on it, and it was another thing. Bob was up there when I was announcing the artists, but he was up there first, talking about the wines of Napa Valley. You were not going to get it for free.

02-00:17:42

Meeker: You know, when you would introduce the art at the gallery space, you said they were there, maybe it was at three to five, and at four o'clock, when there were most people there, you would introduce the artist or the art. Was there

anything in particular that you really wanted to communicate to the people there?

02-00:18:06

Mondavi: I, of course, also was very interested in the artist that I chose, so to also tell a little bit about his accomplishments and his art, and then weave it in with wine. At that time, I wasn't ashamed to say that a good glass of wine is going to make the art shine, you know? You kind of have to be more careful today.

02-00:18:37

Meeker: Why is that?

02-00:18:39

Mondavi: Because, you know, wine is alcohol. Yes. At that time, I was very free and so was everybody, and we said, you know, we also had this thing, a glass of wine a day is good for you. And then every time we did something, it was sort of knocked down.

02-00:19:07

Meeker: So, you were discouraged from talking about the benefits of wine.

02-00:19:09

Mondavi: We had, even written on the label, that a glass of wine a day was good for you. We had to take it off.

02-00:19:18

Meeker: I think it's interesting, what you say, that art can elevate the wine experience, but wine might be able to elevate the art too.

02-00:19:28

Mondavi: Yes, yes. It is a wonderful combination, but as I say, we were freer, and we also put a little bit about that glass of wine on the label. So you see, we went through phases, yes. It was very hard for me, for instance, to receive two boxes of anti-wine labels, that we had to put on every bottle, you know? Because we believed that a little wine every day was good for you. You have a little tea, not that I want to.

02-00:20:17

Meeker: Right, yes, tea is good too, but wine is, wine is good.

02-00:20:25

Mondavi: And you know, we as a group of wine educators, as we were suddenly called, I was a tour guide, but suddenly I was a wine educator. What? And then, we were supposed to give the right story and often, and I think to the benefit of that, people brought forth their personality, but you had to be careful. You had to be careful with alcohol, you know.

02-00:21:07

Meeker: Well, let's talk about that. How did you balance?

02-00:21:16

Mondavi: How do you balance the alcohol with the beauty of wine?

02-00:21:19

Meeker: Right.

02-00:21:22

Mondavi: Well, one thing also, we would say drink carefully. When we had our tastings and so forth, we had such expensive wine and the tastes were small, that we were really not concerned, but as tour guides out there with the people, you had to be careful. Things were abused you know?

02-00:21:52

Meeker: I'm sure sometimes people would come around and had tasted at too many wineries before showing up to Mondavi.

02-00:22:00

Mondavi: What you heard, that many people came on a Saturday afternoon and told it was not so safe.

02-00:22:09

Meeker: Right.

02-00:22:10

Mondavi: It was true, it was true, and you know, you must also remember Martin, everything was free. It was about twenty, twenty-five years ago, that this, about paying for the tastes occurred. Everything was free and people take advantage of that.

02-00:22:32

Meeker: Well, I imagine you were basically head of hospitality at that point, right?

02-00:22:38

Mondavi: Yes.

02-00:22:39

Meeker: Do you remember having conversations about the decision to charge for tastings?

02-00:22:45

Mondavi: Yes. I was actually against it. I liked the old system, gave very measuredly that it was free, because we wanted to educate people about wine that had not had a chance. It started that some wineries charged, and then it took on. Maybe it was right, but I liked it when we would invite people and just say, will you taste a little wine with us and it was free. Yeah.

02-00:23:24

Meeker: That actually kind of brings up another question, which is when you first arrived at Napa in the early 1960s, it was a very quiet, rural area, and by the late sixties, early seventies, you're starting to get a little bit of tourism. By the 1980s and 1990s, it's a huge industry. Was there a point in time, maybe it was like one summer or something, that you really started to notice that, wow, this is big?

02-00:24:08

Mondavi: I did, in the seventies. There were a few of us, and I think Bob always listened to everybody, but we were holding back. It was just going and prices were established and everybody that came expected to pay. In the beginning, it was all strange. It was just like a big part of hospitality was gone, you know? You

now have to first say have you got a ticket. When of course, I started at Charles Krug then, and Robert Mondavi was unheard of. We were out there with the wine like this, you want a taste?

02-00:25:09

Meeker: Flagging people down off the highway.

02-00:25:11

Mondavi: Michael Mondavi said he took a left turn into the winery and people followed him, just to get them there, you know? No, no, it was not easy, but then I think well, Mondavi had one thing that we still do. It's very exposed, you know, it's very visible when you come from north or from south, and people do stop, but it's expensive today.

02-00:25:50

Meeker: Yeah. Especially if you go to a place like Opus One, right?

02-00:25:51

Mondavi: Yeah, it's expensive. Oh my gosh, you know, how much is a tasting of Opus One? Forty-five dollars.

02-00:26:00

Meeker: Did you ever go wine-tasting beyond Napa? Were you interested in what was happening in Sonoma and Mendocino?

02-00:26:11

Mondavi: Obviously, we traveled, yes, and I did go to Sonoma. I went everywhere in the wine region, we visit wine region up north, south or sideways, and always listened, you know what do people have to say. But this whole thing about like charging and having events, it all kind of happened at once. It happened, started in the late eighties and the nineties of course, big time. Now you can do all your theater sketches, it's amazing. It's amazing how much entertaining has taken on the wine industry and seems to be part of promotion.

02-00:27:05

Meeker: Well, you know it's interesting, because you're right, that the art and the performance and the tours are all very much part of the wine industry experience now.

02-00:27:19

Mondavi: Yes, yes.

02-00:27:20

Meeker: And it seems to me that that all began, it germinated in Napa, right? Or were you getting these ideas from elsewhere?

02-00:27:28

Mondavi: It started, you know, with the Wine and Food Society, the Chaine des Rotisseurs, or something like that, and they had an event, and of course the winery would be so happy to contribute the wines. It got to be big time now, for every school event, for everything, and here in Napa Valley, it's just expected that the wine is donated.

02-00:28:04

Meeker: And that's hard.

02-00:28:04

Mondavi: And I'm sure it's like this in Sonoma and so forth. Wherever there are wineries, you are going to be asked for contributions, starting with very good wine and then if you support a program, you know if you sponsor something, big time, yes. That has changed. It used to be that we kind of offered a little contribution, we would bring the wines or so, and we would hand-carry them there for these events. Now it's expected, big time.

02-00:28:47

Meeker: Let's talk about your interest in philanthropy. Both you and your husband were major donors to many different causes. When did you first engage in philanthropy? What was the first sort of cause or organization that you wanted to support personally?

02-00:29:11

Mondavi:

Well for one thing, we supported the Napa Valley Symphony. That would have been the first organization, and we did that with the summer festival, that all profits of the festival went to the symphony. At that time, when Bob and I were doing it in charge, we gave as much as \$100,000 a year, you know, it was there. Unfortunately, that disappeared because now that the corporation does it, they have expense columns that we didn't used to have, because we were generous and we said oh, we can donate that, we can donate this. All of that is gone and now, of course, if somebody has something like a great presentation, a fundraiser or so, they immediately go to the corporation, they immediately go to consideration, and ask if we would sponsor it, not even support it but sponsor it. So, I had piles and piles and piles of things to support, and we always gave advantage to local things, but that also kind of changed, you know.

02-00:30:55

Meeker:

Tell me how you decided what—you know, yes, local, but what other attributes were attractive to you, that signaled somebody or organization was deserving?

02-00:31:08

Mondavi:

Local schools, local youth organizations, like the youth orchestra or the Boys and Girls Club, hospitals. And then, well from then on, it was open, but we tried to support our local organizations and until a few years ago, that was still the norm. I'm sure they still would like to but it's just like so many things, you get overpowered by the system, and suddenly, if Sonoma builds its beautiful Green Music Center, the vineyards are supposed to support it you know, it's accepted.

We actually—and this has something to do with Zelma. Many years ago, Dr. [Maynard] Amerine was still in charge of the wine school at UC Davis, went on a visit, and it was such a discombobulated school physically, and Bob, when he came out, he said, "I'm going to get the vineyards together, they're

going to build a new school for Davis, this is very high on the list.” And I think he did write to Ernie Gallo and a few people, and nobody really responded, and that’s when Bob took on the idea of sponsoring the wine school, which was really viticulture and enology, and the food science school because he really didn’t get the help. And I know Zelma is in the program, so it comes easily to mention that the idea was for education in general and being at University of California, but the seed came from that horrible wine school that Dr. Amerine had.

02-00:33:50

Meeker: Here is one of the best regarded schools of enology and viticulture in the world.

02-00:33:55

Mondavi: In the world, yes.

02-00:33:57

Meeker: I mean certainly the best in the United States.

02-00:34:01

Mondavi: Yes, and as Bob said, “Look we’ve got the grapes, the vineyards, the climate, and the professional knowledge, let’s bring them together.” He wasn’t able to do it but it was an idea.

02-00:34:17

Meeker: Well, it did eventually result in, I think, what was it, a ten or a \$15 million donation.

02-00:34:21

Mondavi: The [Robert Mondavi] Institute [for Food and Wine Science] that we built, yes.

02-00:34:24

Meeker: Right. The donations that happened later on, to support the Institute, to support the fine arts building, the performance building, at Davis, also the donations to build Copia. These were all really big, very big endeavors. Not



everyone who does well necessarily makes these kinds of donations. Do you know where the impetus to engage in philanthropy came from?

02-00:35:05

Mondavi: I didn't quite get the question.

02-00:35:07

Meeker: Well, just that these were major donations that were made. Where do you think the ethos or the idea came from?

02-00:35:21

Mondavi: You mean when did it take on publicly?

02-00:35:22

Meeker: Well, more like psychologically, for either you or for Bob. What was sort of the psychological impetus, desire, to make such major donations?

02-00:35:38

Mondavi: Well, for one thing, Bob knew he couldn't take it with him. That's the start basically, but that was noted, Bob was generous. It started with the [Robert and Margrit Mondavi] Center for the Performing Arts, which is now ten or twelve years old [opened in 2002], and it was just, it was necessary, and he thought it would be wonderful if he could support it. I think it cost \$12 million. So that was major.

The school was the next big thing, and now we are in the museum, where I might have won, but anyway, the one that started it. So yes, University of California at Davis, I think has a lot to do with Robert Mondavi's generosity. He was always ready to give if he could.

02-00:36:57

Meeker: What was it about Davis in particular, that he liked so much?

02-00:37:01

Mondavi: Well, Davis was easy, Martin, because of the wine school, and Bob knew, and we went to the wine school quite often, this was—it was a world renowned

wine school and many of our employees were Davis graduates. There was no other school, institution, that had as good a faculty, as good knowledge, and it was in Davis. So that's how it started, that he kind of felt this crumbled up building, which was not very quaint, had to be restored, and he had hoped to witness to it, but it didn't happen. Maybe it could have happened if we had more time and Bob would have really gone from one to the other, but it happened a little differently, you know.

I don't know if you are aware of Napa. I just say yesterday and today, that Copia was kind of taken on by the CIA, the Culinary Institute [of America], and that too was a big dream that didn't quite come out the way we wanted, but maybe in the end, it did some good. It reflects the reason for building Copia.

02-00:38:32

Meeker:

Well let's talk about that, because you've had many successes in your life, and Copia was a big dream. Can you tell me, from your perspective, where the idea came from?

02-00:38:47

Mondavi:

Well, the ideas were always good. Copia was a splendid idea and in retrospect, the time was wrong. It was too early. It's really one of those things that you, for a long time, tried to sort of figure out why it didn't go. That's very successful, I mean that's not so successful. But you know in the end, if the CIA takes over the \$12 million, and it's going to be a culinary institution, in the end it came out as originally programmed.

The one that has been very successful is UC Davis.

02-00:39:54

Meeker:

Well, the performing arts center has brought culture to the area.

02-00:39:57

Mondavi:

Really, it has. It's the first time that Davis has a visual appearance, you know, it's not that water tower in the far end. I don't know if you know.

02-00:40:13

Meeker: Yes, I know what you're talking about. You see the performance space, right off of Interstate 80.

02-00:40:18

Mondavi: Yes, Robert Mondavi has been a good influence on the community and as I told you before, he could never say no. He'd find a way, he'd wiggle in somehow. Yes.

02-00:41:23

Meeker: We haven't talked about the retail operations. Can you tell me about the role you played in creating a retail operation at Mondavi?

02-00:41:36

Mondavi: I'm not a good salesperson, but we got to be. At Charles Krug, for instance, you were with your tours and at the end, you walked through retail with them and in there you said wine is for sale. Then, at Robert Mondavi it was similar, that you walked through at the end, to retail, without making a big thing out of it, you did say that in case you wanted to take a bottle of wine along, this is the place to get it and we'll give you 10 percent on the case and whatever he said. Also then, the events, like the summer festival, sold quite a bit of wine, and it was kind of realized, obviously by the people that did the accounting, but I didn't know that I had anything to do with it. It was natural, to talk about wine in a good way, but then I let it go. I was told that without making a big fuss about it, I did sell wine. I didn't know.

02-00:43:20

Meeker: Well, maybe there's a lesson there, about a soft selling, as opposed to a hard selling technique.

02-00:43:26

Mondavi: Well, Bob for instance, it was no, never sold a bottle of wine. He just sold the philosophy of wine, you know? But in the end he did sell it.

02-00:43:43

Meeker: When you talk about Bob's philosophy of wine, did you and Bob meet 100 percent on that, or was there like a slight variation that you had?

02-00:43:54

Mondavi: You know, I listened to him more as the teacher and he was not—as I say, he didn't sell a bottle of wine, but after you were through with him and you've tasted some of those wonderful wines, obviously, you went to the retail shop and bought a case of reserve. So he did sell wine, not knowingly maybe, to go for it in a numbered way, but he did sell wine, and we realized that to make the operation successful, that was part of it.

02-00:44:44

Meeker: To sell the wine, of course.

02-00:44:45

Mondavi: Let me tell you, this is 1970. The vineyard room was just built, and you could rent the vineyard room for \$1 a person, and for that you got a third of a bottle of wine. We set it up, we gave them the glasses, and they had to use how ever our caterer, which at the time was Andre Mercier, and he didn't charge much, he probably charged \$4 a dinner, I don't know, and I would decorate those tables with the grape leaves from outside, and I would go to Cost Plus, you could get candles for ten cents apiece, and we would stick those on the table and then it was \$1 a person. But think of it, what you got, yes. And then the whole thing was not totally legal, I think.

02-00:46:00

Meeker: It's interesting, how wine in the United States has a very broad appeal, and you can spend \$2 for a bottle of "Two-Buck Chuck," or you can spend hundreds of dollars for an Opus One or a Screaming Eagle or something, right? The Napa experience tends towards the high end. I'm wondering if over the years, you saw that happening, moving away from it being kind of accessible to a broader group of people, to something that's being more rarified in some ways.

02-00:46:44

Mondavi: There was always Two-Buck Chuck, you know? Also wine was available in different stratas, and if you wanted a good wine for \$5, if you looked around you could certainly find that too. So both ways, and of course when you have reserve wines, they start at maybe \$50 and they sell too. And then you have the wine connoisseur that comes for these wines. There are different clients you know? Then there is the guy that falls into it, and then there's the guy in 1970, that comes in Volkswagen with a torn t-shirt, from Berkeley, and wants reserve wines and pays cash. [laughs] I remember that too. So, there are different clients.

02-00:47:58

Meeker: And in many ways actually, Mondavi becomes a leader in the affordable but quality market.

02-00:48:08

Mondavi: It was. It was always on the top, yes, and obviously, we sold a lot of wine to our retail. It was also sold because our wine educators and anybody that has to do with wine and the presentation in the vineyard, did a good job.

02-00:48:50

Meeker: Is there anything more you'd like to say about Davis and your ideas about giving and philanthropy.

02-00:48:59

Mondavi: To the university?

02-00:49:00

Meeker: Or just in general, what your goals are in philanthropy. Do you have like a larger mission that guides your giving?

02-00:49:13

Mondavi: Well you know, I don't know. First, I still buy five scholarships at UC Davis every year, we still help in this kind of way. I did put in \$2 million into the museum. I don't know, for big future donation, how much I can do, but I certainly will help if I can. I believe in Davis, I believe in the education of

young people, and I believe that having this wine school. [break in audio] It's also now, you know, that the campaign is \$1 billion for a year, and how much we can do with that, but we will certainly look at it and I think we're proud of UC Davis. When we were in full swing, you know full swing means Robert Mondavi was in full swing, we had fifteen Davis graduates work for us, and that can be a testimony, because you're only worth as much as the people that work for you and here we had fifteen graduates working for us.

02-00:51:02

Meeker: And very early on, right?

02-00:51:04

Mondavi: Yes.

02-00:51:05

Meeker: Because Zelma had attended there.

02-00:51:05

Mondavi: Look at Zelma and Tim Mondavi.

02-00:51:09

Meeker: And generations after that.

02-00:51:12

Mondavi: We of course also had winemakers that were not strictly Davis, but still had achieved such a high name in quality for others, and they too talk about Davis as a great school. So I think that supporting Davis is just natural. It's like supporting your kid's school. I mean if the right people from the school come and say let's get together, we need something, that's the first thing you would do, and so it's still up there as one of the first things, to support Davis.

02-00:52:08

Meeker: Is there anything in Napa Valley right now that you think is really exciting?

02-00:52:18

Mondavi: Well, the whole Napa town is exciting, the growth. Napa is exciting. Look at what happened vineyard-wise. I live in Coombsville. This was considered a

little hay pasture, you know, and now it has a Napa appellation. I don't know, have you read the article of Bill Harlan in the *Wine Spectator*.

02-00:53:03

Meeker: Oh, I haven't, no, no.

02-00:53:05

Mondavi: You should.

02-00:53:07

Meeker: What does it say?

02-00:53:08

Mondavi: Well, he's developing a super area in Oakville. New ideas come out every day.

02-00:53:17

Meeker: I'll look that up. That sounds fascinating.

02-00:53:20

Mondavi: You have to, you have to. It's a very interesting article, and so new ideas are not dying.

02-00:53:31

Meeker: What about food? Are there any particular restaurants that you like especially now?

02-00:53:36

Mondavi: In Napa?

02-00:53:36

Meeker: Yeah, or just, yeah, in the valley.

02-00:53:39

Mondavi: I hate to bring that up, I really do. We have some good restaurants. I'm taking you to one. Would you like to go for lunch?

02-00:53:51

Meeker:

Well, let's talk about that. You had mentioned, when you first arrived in Napa, there were Italian family dinner restaurants. But then, you know today, you have restaurants like the French Laundry and you have many others of that caliber. Do you recall the first excellent fine dining restaurant you ate at in Napa?

02-00:54:20

Mondavi:

I think the first restaurant that had some reputation and was excellent, was Domaine Chandon in 1976. It was actually attached to a champagne house, which you can't do today any more, but at the time you could, and that to me was the first restaurant in Napa Valley. Then, something like Piatti's came around in the 1980s. It was amazing, the little things happened here and there and suddenly you had some good places to eat. Obviously, wine had something to do with it and suddenly, there were designated critics that wrote up these places.

My contribution would be more, when I came here in 1963, you know? The difference of the Napa Valley: It was obviously, I don't know why we chose it. Here we were, in the middle of the vineyards, but not knowing anything, and when I look back, I remember all those vineyards that I know now, you know, and they belong to these families. They all have fences now. You know at that time, nothing had fences, and they were all for sale. We were really dependent a lot, on wine producers that sold us the grapes, and so every year, we had of course dinners, we went together with these folks, and you know, they were not so—nobody said oh, this is the favorite. They just grew some grapes you know, and it was very rural. I know about some people, would, in the fifties, you could buy a vineyard for \$1,000 an acre, \$2,000 if it was just super, and I never paid any attention to it. It's now, that when I look back I say oh my gosh, all this stuff was for sale.

The good vineyards were recognized. I know I've said about the Sauvignon and something like that, very recognized, as much as they are today. Bob



always said he wanted To Kalon, you know in the end he exchanged the Krug for To Kalon. He always said that duck pond! It had kind of a wet middle. It makes the best Cabernet Sauvignon.

02-00:58:44

Meeker: The To Kalon?

02-00:58:46

Mondavi: Mm-hmm.

02-00:58:46

Meeker: He called it a duck pond?

02-00:58:49

Mondavi: Yes. He said, “That duck pond, I get the best Cabernet Sauvignon out of that duck pond, and I want that vineyard.” He knew. He knew where the best came from. He went out and tasted, you know. He didn’t just go by reputation, no. And that whole region, from Oakville, going north to Rutherford Bench, had some fabulous vineyards. I remember the Cohn vineyard, oh my gosh, you just, when you had a bunch of grapes from that vineyard, they were so good. It was true, and this is why you must read the *Wine Spectator* now, that Harlan will make even something more special. He says you don’t realize what you’ve got.

02-00:59:56

Meeker: When you look back at Napa Valley over fifty years, is there anything that stands out as really marking how the valley has changed?

02-01:00:11

Mondavi: Well that has. You know, this was called the duck pond, this was called—that has, that it’s now recognized. We feel that we can be the world’s first, that it doesn’t necessarily have to be bought though, maybe it’s Napa Valley, that has changed. It was there, at that time, but now there is strength, we will make the best. And also, the fact that you and I should have bought those vineyards.

[both laugh] And as I say, they were just vineyards by the road. Today, everything is fenced, that's another thing.

02-01:01:17

Meeker: What are the constants? What hasn't changed substantially over fifty years? Is there anything that you can call a constant?

02-01:01:30

Mondavi: Well, of course what has changed, these people now have a tremendous value on the vineyard, you know, \$3- to \$400,000 an acre. They have a tremendous concept on how much their grapes are worth. Their lifestyle of course has changed with all of that, because many of them have really and truly become quite wealthy. You know, probably that was there at that time too, in another form, but now it's very visible.

02-01:02:10

Meeker: You're right, because Cesare Mondavi bought the Krug from a famous San Francisco family, right?

02-01:02:23

Mondavi: Yeah.

02-01:02:25

Meeker: So there's always been wealth in Napa Valley. It just looks different now.

02-01:02:31

Mondavi: No, I think I was trying to get—you said it better—that things have changed. On the other hand, it has been like that, a little different form. But you know, you cannot say if I had, but if I had bought the Pelissa Vineyard in Yountville, about 200 acres, for \$100 an acre, you know if.

02-01:03:10

Meeker: We talked a little bit last time, about the role of women in the wine industry, and I think now, certainly it's still a male dominated world, but you see women like Zelma and Eileen Crane, and Mary Edwards and Cathy Corison.

02-01:03:34

Mondavi: Right, the big names, yes.

02-01:03:37

Meeker: How do you think the presence of women leaders in the wine industry have changed?

02-01:03:45

Mondavi: That has changed, but on the other hand, at this early time, when I was here, the women were kind of still in charge, but more in the Italian sense, where they dominated the house, they dominated the kids and so forth, and certainly nobody made wine. But the women knew something about wine and I'm sure they went into the cellar and tasted it with their husbands, and had a lot to say, only in a different way. Then, in my time, that was a big change. The first thing that I realized at Robert Mondavi, is that women, girls, schlepped hoses, so they worked in the cellar a little bit, schlepped hoses. Then, on those wine-tastings, suddenly women appeared, and somebody like Zelma Long, of course made a tremendous step. So there were about a dozen women that were working in the wine industry, in different directions, that became an item in the wine industry. That was also during my time, that didn't exist when I came. There were no women in the wine industry when I came, in 1963, but there was mother Rosa, that was Bob's mother and she ruled the roost, you know, but it was different.

02-01:05:50

Meeker: Would it be possible to say that the increasing number of women as leaders in the wine industry have changed the industry as a whole?

02-01:06:01

Mondavi: I could say yes, it has changed the history. The University of California at Davis had something to do with it too, because they graduated some winemakers and women themselves, and then you know, today we have chateau owners. We have really—there is no difference. A woman can do

anything in the wine industry today but she couldn't at my time, she was not accepted.

02-01:06:46

Meeker: Let's end, okay? Is there anything else you want to add?

02-01:06:51

Mondavi: Well maybe we should have another meeting and just kind of leave it open.

02-01:06:54

Meeker: Okay, we can do that. I'd love to know what you would like to talk about as well, what else you wanted to add.

02-01:07:04

Mondavi: Well, I get the inspiration from you, what you want, and I can only talk about the early times and what I saw as a marked difference. Let me say, especially in the seventies and eighties, when the women started to make an appearance and be there in making wine, and it was only accepted, women did have a palate, women can say something about that.

02-01:07:44

Meeker: I wonder, did it take much to convince men that women's palates should be taken seriously?

02-01:07:54

Mondavi: Well, I think women have a strong enough voice, that it was heard, yeah. But we did, we said look, we judge food, we are chefs, we know it's just so easy. We know what's good or bad, why can't we have a voice? And then it was suddenly accepted, that women spoke.

02-01:08:25

Meeker: Do you know who some of those women early on, who were speaking loudly enough so that men were forced to listen?

02-01:08:34

Mondavi: Well, they're the people at Davis, like for instance Ann Noble, and then they had one winemaker, MaryAnn Graf. Zelma. They kind of formed a club. We

also formed a club, that we called Women with Wine Sense, and it still exists, it was maybe one of the early aggregations of women that said we know something, we can make a change. Yeah, Women of Wine Sense, and Michaela Rodino was strong there. I was in it, two or three, but yeah.

02-01:09:52

Meeker: Okay, let's stop today, okay?

02-01:09:54

Mondavi: Good.

[End of Interview]