Robert Mondavi dies

16 May 2008 by JR

See *New York Times* obituary
See *San Francisco Chronicle* obituary
See Linda Murphy's obituary on decanter.com

I know people are meant to keep obituaries on file but I can't bring myself to follow that practice.

Nick and I are just very sad that we'll never again clap eyes on that amazing nose, knowing gleam and that wonderfully rolling gait. The California wine scene would be immeasurably different today without the pivotal role played by this great visionary. Robert Mondavi *was* California, if not American, wine as far non Americans were concerned. And he represented wine itself with more sophistication and generosity of spirit than most Europeans

The opening in 1966 of his eponymous winery in Oakville is still a geographical landmark and represented a historical one too, ushering in a host of ambitious, outward-looking new winemakers in the Napa Valley, one of the most blessed wine regions on earth. If Robert Mondavi had set up shop in Sonoma, things might have been very different indeed.

His second wife Margrit Biever was a tower of strength in his latter years when he finally bowed to nature and started to age (not until he was into his tenth decade, mind you). That he should have lost his hearing towards the end seemed particularly cruel, but then he was probably always better at communicating than listening.

Those who knew him only through the most recent book on him, *The House of Mondavi,* will have only the most partial grasp of his personality and influence. He was a massive force for good not just in California wine but in the entire world of wine. I never heard a bad word said of him, even if he was easy to tease. "I just want to say this about that" was his catchphrase, as was his claim for four decades to make wines "that belong in the company of the finest in the world".

We feel blessed to have spent time with him in the Napa Valley many times, in San Francisco at a dinner given by wine writer Gerald Asher when I met him for the first time in 1976, in Melbourne at a wine show with the likes of Michael Broadbent and Len Evans in 1985, in various cities in the US, and many a time in London where he drove his importer mad by ignoring the vintages that Geoffrey Roberts currently had to sell in favour of their successors, about which he was always so much more enthusiastic. He most memorably turned up on the opening night in 1981 of Nick's restaurant L'Escargot in Soho, London, having heard that its speciality was to be American wines.
He ended up having dinner with us and the foreman of the builders - and giving an interview to Godfrey Smith for *The Sunday Times*.

The Robert Mondavi winery now, almost unbelievably, belongs to Constellation. The man himself was 94 and is survived by Margrit and his children from his first marriage, Michael, Tim and Marcia.