

Festival Napa Valley draws sybarites, arts lovers

By Catherine Bigelow | August 3, 2016 | Updated: August 8, 2016 10:57am

1



Photo: Drew Altizer, Special To The Chronicle

IMAGE 1 OF 18

Margrit Mondavi (seated) and Sophia Loren with family and fans Andrea and Carlo Ponti (standing, left) and Jan and Maria Shrem at Far Niente Winery during Festival Napa Valley.

When actress **Sophia Loren** recently landed in Napa Valley from Zurich, her luggage didn't follow.

Yet she was so determined to attend a Festival Napa Valley dinner honoring her friend, arts philanthropist **Margrit Mondavi**, that she briefly considered borrowing the pajamas of her son, conductor **Carlo Ponti**.

Thankfully, Loren's luggage arrived just before dinner. And Mondavi, who just celebrated her 91st birthday, delighted 250 guests at this Far Niente Winery finale of the 2016 festival in her honor.

"Margrit Mondavi has accomplished more than anyone to make Napa Valley the place it is today, filled with culture, creativity and joy," toasted FNV co-founder **Rick Walker**. "She shares with everyone a passion for living life to its fullest."

That same passion was felt during 10 action-packed days of music, art, food and wine events comprising the festival, which has rebranded itself from its original Festival del Sole moniker as it enters its second decade.

This 11-year evolution is thanks to the vision of Rick Walker and dedication from early advocates Mondavi; the late **John Traina**; arts patrons **Maria Manetti Shrem** and her husband, **Jan Shrem**; Fine Arts Museums board president **Dede Wilsey**; FNV trustees **Athena** and **Timothy Blackburn**; Bouchaine vintners **Tatiana** and **Gerret Copeland**; and composer **Gordon Getty**.

Keeping up with the festival's sybaritic schedule — daily food tastings, vineyard yoga, lavish lunches, free concerts, post-parties, fashion — requires an almost Herculean strength. Arts lovers zipped around to exquisite valley venues where they dined with top toques, sipped primo vino, and were dazzled by stage stars **Kathleen Battle**, **Sergio Mendes**, the San Francisco Ballet, Broadway star **Kristin Chenoweth**, violinist **Sarah Chang** and baritone **Lester Lynch**.

"We're not a rock music type-festival. We strive to present great culture in intimate surroundings," Walker said. "In the early years, we had one daily program. Now we've got jazz, fashion, food, wellness and wine events within a day."

At the Lincoln Theater, sizzling Cuban pianist **Aldo López-Gavilán** made his U.S. orchestral debut

with a roof-raising rendition of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." The next day, Gavilán provided pitch-perfect accompaniment to the **Brunello Cucinelli** Fall 2017 fashion show hosted by Neiman Marcus GM **Alan Morrell** on the eco-chic grounds of swanky Solage resort.

(Gavilán also performs Aug. 14 at SFJazz. And thanks to a FNV partnership with the Cuban Ministry of Culture, the pianist and his wife, Havana Chamber Orchestra conductor **Daiana García**, plan to play FNV next year.)

The festival's key fundraiser was, once again, held at magical Meadowood Resort, where Mid-fest at magical Meadowood Resort, Emmy Award-winner **Wayne Brady** emceed the Imaginarium gala. Organized by FNV trustees **Maggie Oetgen** and **Darioush Khaledi**, this colorful kaleidoscope spun with four-star fare, limber feats courtesy of Cirque du Soleil's "O" cast and a **Fritz Hatton**-led live auction of luxe lots.

As an almost full moon rose over Meadowood's verdant croquet lawn, a sweet-sounding \$1.3 million had been raised for FNV's "Arts for All" initiative: free community concerts, music scholarships, public school arts enhancements and the creation of Napa County's inaugural K-12 arts education master plan.

Yet the most fervent bravos were saved for Mondavi and her Far Niente dinner, hosted by proprietor **Beth Nickel**, with underwriters **Maria** and **Jan Shrem**.

"Margrit Mondavi has accomplished more than anyone to make Napa Valley the place it is today, filled with culture, creativity and joy," toasted Walker. "Margrit shares with everyone a passion for living life to its fullest."

In July, the Robert Mondavi Winery celebrated its 50th anniversary. During that half-century, this petite blond powerhouse, with her late husband, vintner **Robert Mondavi**, helped propel Napa Valley onto the world stage.

Loren led a chorus of tributes testifying to Mondavi's far-reaching cultural contributions. Chef **Lidia Bastianich** created an Italian feast and jazz star **Dave Koz** premiered a new track sung by Monica Mancini.

"I want to thank you," Loren said. "But know that whatever you've done in your life, a piece of your heart is in that. That's the most important thing, a spiritual thing: to leave part of yourself in a piece of work."

A host of heavyweights offered videotaped testaments to Mondavi's culinary, artistic and philanthropic efforts, that, in turn, inspired them.

Dressed in chef whites, **Thomas Keller** taped Mondavi's hand-painted menus and colorful artwork to his uniform.

Looking into the camera, the Michelin-star chef declared, "Margrit Mondavi, You ARE my Napa Valley!"

I wanna be around: And you do, too, when legendary crooner **Tony Bennett**, who just celebrated his 90th birthday, lands here, high on Nob Hill, to celebrate that milestone Aug 19.

Protocol Chief **Charlotte Shultz** and **Willie Brown** cooked up a daylong celebration at the Fairmont Hotel, where Bennett first belted out his beloved hit, "I Left My Heart." Public festivities begin at 11:30 on the lawn of the Fairmont followed by an unveiling of a life-like Bennett statue. Later that night, the S.F. Giants pay tribute at the ballpark . A few tickets remain for an Aug. 20 benefit Tony Bennett dinner-concert at the Fairmont. It won't fit on a T-shirt, but organizers endowed a new entity in honor of this youth arts education philanthropist: The Tony Bennett Fund for Emergency Pediatric Care at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital. For tickets: (415) 554-5257.



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