

Composing Opus One

The legacy of Robert Mondavi and Baron Philippe de Rothschild lives on in a new team of young talent



Opus One winemaker Michael Silacci surveys surrounding vineyards from atop the winery. In the past two decades, he has focused on the vines. (Cody Pickens)

By

- [Mitch Frank](#)

-

[From the Nov 15, 2025, issue](#)

[Opus One](#) was conceived in bed. A lavish canopy bed in a sumptuously decorated room in [Bordeaux](#), to be precise. In 1978, [Robert Mondavi](#) journeyed to the town of Pauillac in Bordeaux to meet with [Baron Philippe de Rothschild](#), the larger-than-life personality behind [Château Mouton-Rothschild](#). Mondavi and Rothschild had first met eight years earlier and had been bouncing around the idea of a partnership since. But now they were meeting to discuss it for the first time as a serious idea and not a wistful dream.

The baron knew how to entertain. Greeting Mondavi with a hearty “Bob!” he acted as tour guide for the day, displaying his ease with English, which he learned during his years attending boarding school in the U.K. He showed Mondavi and Mondavi's daughter, Marcia, around the vineyards and cellars, and then his renowned museum of wine artifacts.

Mondavi remembered the day as perfect. In his memoir, he wrote, “That night, we met the baron for dinner in the family library. We sat around a small table, almost family-style, and we had quail roasted on the spit. During the meal we had the pleasure of drinking three glorious wines. First, a 25-year-old [Château Clerc Milon](#). An excellent wine. Then, as the centerpiece of the evening, we enjoyed a 100-year-old bottle of [Château Mouton](#). Amazing! A wine as smooth and sensuous as velvet. Finally, with dessert, we had a [1945 Château d’Yquem](#).”

The conversation flowed as easily as the wine, but they did not talk business. For that, the baron asked Mondavi to meet the next day at 9:30 a.m. Right on time, Mondavi showed up in the morning at Rothschild’s office, only to be told by a housekeeper that the baron almost always worked from bed. Thus, Mondavi was ushered to the bedroom and given a chair. Rothschild sat propped up on a small hill of pillows, a special desk across his lap and a phone at his side. A spaniel snored contentedly at his feet.

Over the next hour and a half, the titans of wine formed their 50-50 partnership, setting down their founding principles: They would produce one benchmark wine, a Bordeaux-style blend; that wine would be both a statement and something to share with family and friends; and they would be stewards of the land the wine was grown upon.



The Opus One winery opened in 1991, with a design that blended neoclassicism with modernity. (Courtesy of Opus One)

When Mondavi returned to California and briefed his sons, [Michael](#) and [Tim](#), on the partnership, they were initially skeptical. For two wineries with such strong personalities, collaboration would not be easy. But Robert knew the partnership would pay immediate dividends, even before they made and sold their first bottle of what would eventually be named [Opus One](#).

“No one in the past 50 years had done more for French wine than the baron, and everyone knew it,” Mondavi later wrote. “The fact that he wanted to have a joint venture with our winery immediately elevated us into a unique position in the California wine industry. The baron wanted to do business in America, with a Napa Valley winery as a partner, and we were chosen. The prestige value was enormous—and so was the publicity.”

There was something more personal, too. “Imagine how proud this all made me feel. My grandparents were poor sharecroppers in Sassoferrato. My parents came to America without a penny in their pockets. Now, thanks to hard work and the ability to turn humble grapes into fine wine, the names Rothschild and Mondavi were going to stand side by side on every case and bottle of Opus One that would travel the world. Now there’s a taste of the American dream!”

From the very beginning, in that bedroom in Bordeaux, Opus One was envisioned as a statement, a signal that [Napa Valley](#) was taking its place among the great wine regions of the world. But while Opus One became a symbol before its first wine was bottled, becoming a winery, a true winery with its own identity, proved a lot trickier.

It took three years for the Mondavis and Rothschilds to decide on a name for their wine—numerous candidates were proposed. Some industry insiders dubbed it “Phil and Bob’s Big Red.”



Robert Mondavi (left) and Baron Philippe de Rothschild in 1983 in Napa, discussing the newly designed Opus One label. The joint project they first envisioned in 1970 was becoming a bottled reality. (Courtesy of Mondavi)

The boldness of the project was fitting, hatched by two of the most audacious personalities the wine world has ever seen. [Georges Philippe de Rothschild was born in Paris in 1902](#), a member of the English branch of the legendary banking family. Members of the family were typically brilliant but circumspect. Philippe, however, was a born adventurer and showman,

the kind of man who never accepted limitations. Sent to the neglected family winery at age 12 when World War I broke out and the front lines crept toward Paris, he fell in love with Mouton.

At age 20 he returned, having convinced his father to let him manage the winery. He started pouring money into it. Just two years after he arrived, he began aging, blending and bottling the wine at the château rather than selling it in bulk to négociants. It was a revolutionary form of quality control for the grands crus, and soon all were copying him.

His innovations kept flowing. In 1926, he commissioned the first artist painting for Mouton's label. In 1932, he created a second wine, Mouton-Cadet, focusing on barrels of wine he didn't consider good enough for Mouton. It became so successful, he expanded it, sourcing grapes from beyond the estate and creating a mass-market powerhouse for Bordeaux.

His life outside of wine was equally exhilarating. In the late 1920s, he became a Grand Prix driver, competing at Monaco and Le Mans under the pseudonym Georges Philippe. In the 1930s, he was a member of the French national champion bobsledding team, but refused to participate in the 1936 Winter Olympics in Germany due to the Nazi persecution of Jews. He wrote and translated several volumes of poetry and was a producer of film and stage plays. When Germany invaded France in 1940, he was a pilot in the air force. Arrested by the puppet Vichy government in Algeria, he soon was released and fled to England. He would enter Normandy in 1944 with Charles de Gaulle as a member of the Free French Forces.

The one constant in his life was Mouton, which continued to be his passion and his home. In 1952, he began a campaign to secure its elevation in the 1855 Bordeaux Classification from second-growth to first-growth, an obsession that kept him focused on improving the quality of the wine.



Tasting the first vintage in 1980: (from left) Mouton U.S. sales rep Miklos Dora, (NA), Michael Mondavi, Mouton CEO Philippe Cottin, winemaker Lucien Sionneau, Robert Mondavi, winemaker Tim Mondavi and Mondavi CFO George Schofield (Courtesy of Opus One)

Robert Mondavi was not a man to accept limitations either, and it often got him into trouble, most famously when his mother and younger brother pushed him out of the winery he had devoted his life to. The eldest son of poor Italian immigrants, Mondavi spent the first half of his adult years growing the wine business his parents, Cesare and Rosa Mondavi, had purchased: [Charles Krug](#). He was a marketing genius, with big ideas, shifting the focus from low-priced wines to higher-priced, premium ones. Bold and brash, Robert got into too many fights with his brother, [Peter](#), about the company's direction, until finally Rosa nudged him out.

In 1966, at the age of 53, he began anew, establishing [Robert Mondavi Winery](#) in Oakville. It was the most ambitious winery project Napa Valley had seen since before Prohibition, but Mondavi believed that Napa could produce wines just as outstanding as those from Bordeaux, and that America could become a true wine culture, a place where wine and good food went together on the table.

Baron Philippe watched California's rise with interest, and when he found out Mondavi would be at a wine and spirits industry convention in 1970 that he was attending, he suggested they meet. Over drinks at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel on Hawai'i's Big Island, looking out at Kauna'oa Bay, the two men chatted and shared their dreams. Finally, the baron proposed that they make a wine together.

They both loved the idea, but neither was positioned to launch a new project just then. Mondavi was locked in a bitter lawsuit with Rosa and Peter over his share of the family's Charles Krug brand. His ousting had left him with little money, all of which he had plowed into his fledgling winery. And Rothschild was focused fully on gaining Mouton's unprecedented promotion.

Then in 1973, the baron achieved his dream. The 1855 Classification was updated by elevating Mouton to first-growth. And in 1976, a judge ruled that Robert's family had improperly devalued and shrunk Robert's stake in Charles Krug. Peter and Robert settled their suit, giving Robert \$11 million in cash and assets, including a sizable stake in [To Kalon vineyard](#). The deal allowed Robert to settle debts and buy out investors he had taken on. The timing was suddenly right for both men.

And so, in April 1980, after 18 months of figuring out logistics and a trip by the French to Oakville to see what they'd be working with, Mondavi and Rothschild hosted a press conference in San Francisco announcing their joint venture. Across the Atlantic, their children, Michael Mondavi and [Baroness Philippine](#), held a companion conference in Paris. The impact was immediate. The most famous vintner in Bordeaux was partnering on a Napa wine. Baron Philippe looked visionary. Robert Mondavi looked like the man leading Napa Valley onto the global wine stage.



The first two vintages of the wine, then called Napamédoc, were offered as a case at the inaugural Napa Valley Auction in 1981. (Courtesy of Opus One)

The announcement of Opus One was like a wedding, full of excitement, anticipation and a lot of toasts. Making the winery a reality, however, quickly proved to be a marriage of two partners who perhaps should have gotten to know each other better before tying the knot.

The partnership was 50-50—the Rothschilds put up the financial capital for the venture, while the Mondavis would supply grapes, primarily from their parcels of To Kalon. The wines would be made in the Mondavi winery until a permanent home was built. The first vintage would be the 1979, and Mouton winemaker Lucien Sionneau would team with his counterpart, Robert's son Tim, to taste through the barrels of young wines in the Mondavi cellar and choose the blend. The two wineries' sales and marketing teams would each have a hand in selling the wine. Mouton CEO [Philippe Cottin](#) was instrumental in figuring out how the deal would work. "Philippe Cottin is the unsung hero of Opus One," says Tim Mondavi.

Various names were thrown around for the project, including Duet, Alliance and Gemini, until the baron offered Opus One—Opus suggested a masterful composition and One denoted a *premier cru* wine. Designer Susan Pate spent months working on label ideas, eventually sketching the two men's profiles back to back, above their signatures. The baron's head was placed slightly higher, but Mondavi's signature came first. Robert joked to Philippe, "Who wants a picture of a Jewish nose and an Italian nose?"

Philippe and Robert shared a vision. But the label showed France looking in one direction and California in the other, which aptly described the winemaking team at first. Sionneau arrived in Oakville, and young lab assistant [Geneviève Janssens](#), now Mondavi's director of winemaking, was asked to serve as translator between him and Tim. She quickly realized, she says, that the Frenchman didn't really want to be there. "Because he was from Pauillac, and the people of Pauillac at that time never left Pauillac."

[Paul Hobbs](#), then a young cellar worker, remembers that the French team thought the Mondavi cellar was far too clean. Others were shocked that the Bordelais smoked constantly while inside the cellars. And while the Mondavis encouraged innovation and experimentation, the French hewed close to tradition. Hobbs remembers asking why they chose certain techniques and receiving blank stares.

In the first decade, the wines could best be described as Oakville fruit vinified with Bordeaux techniques. The Mondavi team was in charge of handling the vineyards and deciding when to pick the grapes. But once that fruit arrived in the cellar, just as at Mouton, the young wine was regularly [pumped over](#) during [fermentation](#). It was aged in 100 percent [new oak barrels](#) and [racked](#) regularly, then heavily [fined](#) and [filtered](#) before bottling. The resulting wine was focused, lacking some California richness.

For the first vintage, Tim and Lucien each made their own potential blends. Robert and Philippe ordered them to start over and work together. Slowly, the two men grew to trust each other. “Blind-tasting proved to be our common language,” says Tim. “And I think Lucien learned to appreciate our sense of innovation, while I learned from French tradition.”



CEO Chris Lynch says the winery functions as a semi-independent small, luxury winery that happens to have two large, wealthy owners. (Cody Pickens)

Collaboration grew easier when [Patrick Léon](#) replaced Sionneau in 1984—Léon was less traditional in his approach. But as my colleague James Molesworth notes in his vertical tasting of Opus One, the first decade delivered some vintages that look toward California and others that look toward Pauillac. The partners were figuring each other out.

Marketing started with a bang. The collaboration was just a year old when Robert helped organize the first [Napa Valley Auction](#). He consigned what became the top lot—a mixed case of the [1979](#) and [1980](#) vintages of what was still provisionally called Napamédoc. On a sweltering June day in 1981 at the Meadowood Resort, auctioneer Michael Broadbent stood

barefoot in a tub of ice water to try and keep cool while ratcheting up the bids. The hammer fell at \$24,000, sold to Syracuse wine store owner Charles Mara, at that time, the most expensive case of California wine sold at auction.

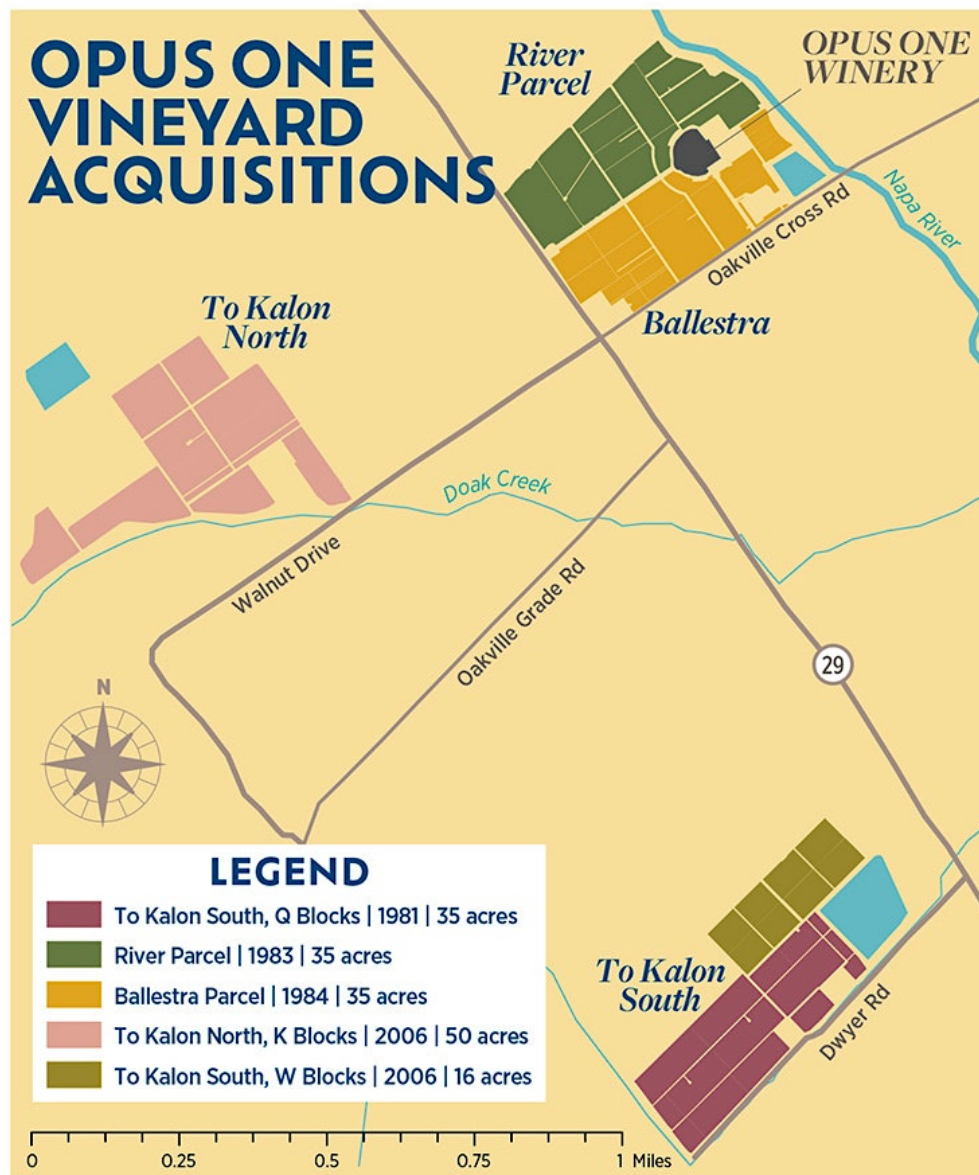
The first bottles to go on sale, released in 1984, also induced some sticker shock—\$50 a bottle, higher than any American wine on the market. The price provoked hesitation. The Mondavi sales team responded by organizing a nationwide by-the-glass program in restaurants. Wine lovers may have hesitated to shell out for a bottle, but were willing to try a \$10 glass. The Mondavi team also worked with distributors to drum up demand, selling by allocation. Sales picked up.

Opus' identity began to solidify as it acquired its own vineyards and cellars. Mondavi sold various parcels of To Kalon to the joint venture, beginning in 1981. Opus bought two vineyards totaling nearly 100 acres across Highway 29 in 1983 and 1984. The winery itself began to go up in 1989 on that side of the road. It proved a costly endeavor thanks to a geothermal spring underneath that required a special cooling system and structural support for the underground cellars. Two years and \$26 million later, [the winery opened its doors](#). Baron Philippe was not there for the opening. He died in 1988, but his daughter, Philippine, had stepped in as a key voice in the partnership.

By then, the novelty of the Franco-American collaboration had faded some. [Champagne](#) titan [Moët & Chandon](#) had opened [a sparkling operation in Yountville](#), and [Taittinger](#) was building [Domaine Carneros](#). [Christian Moueix](#) had founded [Dominus Estate](#).

What's more, the wine world was becoming more international, with consumers increasingly looking for wines from new regions, and winemakers forming partnerships with colleagues overseas. During the 1990s, Mouton and Mondavi each launched ventures in [Chile](#). The Mondavis [teamed with Tuscany's Frescobaldi family](#) to make various wines in Italy and explored a potential project in southern France.

Having its own vineyards and winery helped Opus One's wines become more consistent. But sales slowed, with members of both sides arguing over how best to market the wine. Thanks to the growth of Mondavi's value brand [Woodbridge](#) and other new projects, by 1993 total company volume had reached roughly 8 million cases. The company went public that year. At 25,000 cases, Opus was not a big priority for the Mondavi team. An outside analyst hired by the Rothschilds recommended Opus be given more independence.



Opus One's To Kalon vineyard holdings are known for growing some of Napa's finest Cabernet. (Lisa Aurigemma)

Michael Silacci's first title at Opus One was DOVE—director of viticulture and enology. He says it was appropriate because he was the peacemaker. In 2001, as part of efforts to make Opus more independent, Silacci was hired. Mondavi and Léon continued as the winemakers, but they were only at the winery a few times each year for blending. Silacci was the day-to-day manager in the vineyards and cellar and became the peacemaker between Opus' dueling identities.

He was a perfect fit for the job. He had found his love for wine while working in a French vineyard in his 20s, but was born and raised in a California farm town. He split his wine education between the University of California, Davis, and the Université de Bordeaux.

Spend any time with Silacci and you quickly realize another asset. He is disarmingly charming, with a friendly smile, twinkling eyes behind his glasses and an endless supply of

anecdotes. He has a talent for managing people, a passion for wine and a vision of where he wants to go.

On a sunny recent day in Napa Valley, Silacci is walking the rows of K block in To Kalon, looking down the slope toward the winery on the other side of the highway. He points out which parcels belong to Opus One and which are Mondavi's. Among the first moves he made after taking the job was to request vineyard teams that were dedicated exclusively to Opus One, rather than share crews with Mondavi. "They asked, 'Why? Don't you want people who have perspective on different places.' I said, 'No. I want people who understand the principles of viticulture and enology at Opus One.' " It was a quiet declaration of independence. Silacci was born in Gilroy, California, the proud "Garlic Capital of the World," located halfway between San Jose and Monterey.

He grew up helping on his grandparents' farms: One side operated a dairy; the other grew plums. In his senior year of high school, he was accepted into the University of California, Santa Cruz, but decided not to go to college until he knew what he wanted to do with his life. "I had friends going off to school who didn't know what they wanted to do," he says. "That made no sense to me."

So he worked for his grandfather on the dairy farm and drove a delivery truck for Pepsi, saving up money. Then he traveled as far as Hawai'i and spent three months working at a restaurant and sleeping on a beach. Cash in hand, he embarked for Asia. A French woman he met in Japan (and later married) encouraged him to work harvest in the [Loire Valley](#) to learn the language.

The spirit in the vineyards and the two-hour lunches illuminated that wine was the calling he had been searching for. During his wine education in California and Bordeaux, he apprenticed under [Denis Dubourdieu](#), the first of several key mentors. In 1987, he took a job at California's [Beaulieu Vineyard](#). There he met the legendary [André Tchelistcheff](#), who took Silacci under his wing. After a stint in [Oregon](#), he returned to Napa in 1995 to work for [Warren Winiarski](#) as winemaker at [Stag's Leap Wine Cellars](#). The former college professor subjected him to 10 interviews and several homework assignments before giving him the job. Silacci accepted a pay cut and a one-year probation to take the role, but enjoyed working with Winiarski—every day an education.

In June of 2000, Silacci was contacted about an opening at Opus. He loved his current job, but it was a tempting possibility. "I loved Stag's Leap—I loved working in Fay and Stag's Leap vineyards. We bought [Arcadia](#), and I got to know it. So the thought of working in To Kalon was a dream."

Silacci proved the right man to increase the winery's independence from the two owner families. Within two years, he became the first solo winemaker for the winery. A year later, the company appointed its first sole CEO, [David Pearson](#). Before that, there had always been co-CEOs.



Regenerative farming has attracted wildlife to the vineyards, from hares and gophers to coyotes and hawks. (Courtesy of Opus One)

Tim Mondavi believes it was the right move. “In line with its original mandate, Opus was growing into its own identity,” he says. And by then, his attention was consumed with the Mondavi family’s infighting and battles with the company board.

The house Robert Mondavi had built was in trouble, and in 2004, [the board accepted a buyout offer from Constellation Brands](#). After meeting with Baroness Philippine, the two owners announced that the partnership would remain the same. Constellation would merely assume the Mondavi family’s place. But there was a difference—the Mondavis had always been just across the road. Opus One’s two owners were now in France and upstate New York, giving the winery even more freedom to grow into its own identity.

Pearson made key changes to the business side. When he arrived, Opus was sold by both Mondavi and Rothschild importers in each foreign market. No more. Opus would now have its own sales teams, and it became the second non-French wine to be sold overseas through the Place de Bordeaux, giving it a powerful distribution network. According to current CEO Chris Lynch, in 2004 less than 10 percent of Opus was exported. Last year more than half the wine was sold overseas in 90 markets.

Since Silacci fully took the reins 22 years ago, he has been constantly tinkering to improve Opus. For instance, he has spent that past 13 years identifying some of the [ambient yeast strains](#) in the vineyard, utilizing them to produce a wine more connected to the land. There’s been a comprehensive mapping project of all 170 acres the winery now owns, noting each vine, its age, whether it’s healthy or virused. He conducted an 11-year trial in [biodynamic farming](#), which he eventually ceased in 2016 because he found it was making the vines too vigorous. Instead, the entire estate is now [farmed organically](#).

Over the past five years, with the help of assistant winemaker and viticulturist Kimberlee Marinelli, he's been shifting the vineyards to regenerative farming, working to improve the health of the soil and ecosystem. The transformation is striking. Walking through the parcels surrounding the winery, Silacci points out beehives Marinelli has installed, along with a vegetable garden. After gophers started eating new vine plantings, bird boxes were added to encourage raptors to make their homes among the vines. As Silacci talks, a hare runs through 10 rows down.

"My first goal was to learn what the different vineyard blocks have to offer," Silacci says. "And then do our best to let that character show in the wine."



Kimberlee Marinelli started at Opus as an intern in 2021. Now assistant winemaker and viticulturist, she has led efforts to adopt regenerative farming. (Cody Pickens)

All of these changes have benefitted the wine, which has enjoyed some of its strongest vintages under Silacci. While the wines routinely earned outstanding and sometimes classic scores before his arrival, they have enjoyed a run of classic-scoring vintages since. The wines offer a fascinating lens on To Kalon. Compared with other wines from that vineyard, they offer more elegance and grace, and yet retain the power and richness of the site.

The morning after his walk through the vineyards, Silacci is in the lab on the second floor of the winery, conducting a tasting with his team. Marinelli is there, along with assistant winemaker Angela Vavricka, who oversees cellar operations. There's a relatively new face, too, one with a bright red head of hair. In March, Opus announced that [Meghan Zobeck](#), formerly winemaker at [Burgess Cellars](#), had become director of winemaking.

Silacci has no plans to retire from winemaking, but he's 72, and the Opus One board, which is still made up of key representatives from Constellation and the Rothschild family, felt it was time for him to think about succession. He immediately thought of Zobeck.

A former contracts negotiator with the NFL's Denver Broncos, she has had a meteoric rise in wine since 2012, interning at Stag's Leap and [Screaming Eagle](#), then working with Philippe Melka and Jamie Araujo before taking the reins at Burgess just before the winery burned down in the 2020 wildfires. She helped it build a new identity in new cellars.

Silacci loves her focus on regenerative farming, and her young perspective, which he thinks will help her lead Opus into the coming years. "Meghan's was the first name I gave to the recruiter," he says. "In addition to her skills and her background was the fact that she has a group of people that follow her that are never gonna follow me, right? It really gives us a chance to communicate or connect with that group through her. Plus, she's just such an upbeat, positive person."

For Zobeck, the appeal of coming to work there started in the vineyard. But since arriving, she has been struck by the culture Silacci has created. "They're so motivated, so aligned," she says. "They care so much about what they're doing."

When it started nearly five decades ago, Opus One was a revolution in the wine world. Today it is more dynamic than ever. For Silacci, it simply reaffirms Baron Philippe and Robert Mondavi's founding principles.

"Mr. Mondavi and Baron Philippe took risks. That's what they would have us do," says Silacci. "But I return to their principles—first, that Opus should be a classic Bordeaux red wine among the best; second, that it should be rooted in Napa [terroir](#); and third, that the people who work there should become stewards. I think that means not just stewards of the land, but also of the people who work on it."



Meghan Zobeck was Silacci's first choice for director of winemaking and successor because of her farming approach and energy. (Cody Pickens)