

Lydia Mondavi on Highway 29

Words: Claire St. John
Photo: Ryan Puckett

For a long time it was a mystery. How could French men and women eat butter-rich food and wine with every lunch and dinner and still be healthier and slimmer than Americans?

Butter certainly wasn't the answer. But wine, as it turned out, was.

Just a couple of glasses of red wine a day led to cardiovascular health, research revealed. Benefits were due largely to flavonoids found in the skin and seeds of grapes and Americans rejoiced by lifting a glass.

But people were slow to make the connection between inside health and outside beauty. It is only recently that skin care products infused with grape seed extract have made it to the market.

And until now grape seed extract has not been featured in a cosmetics line.

Enter Lydia Mondavi who, with her background in spas and skin care and her connection to an iconic wine family, has launched 29, the first cosmetic line that is good for skin. It features 70 products infused with grape seed extract and sun protection.

Mondavi named her new line 29 after the highway that runs through the Napa Valley, close to her home.

"We want to impart that sense of place and bring it back to Napa," she said.

Mondavi's house, which she shares with husband Rob, is a bungalow built in 1914 on a hill overlooking acres of grape vines.

"Nothing's really been done to it," she said. "We have pictures from 1915, and it's exactly the same."

Nearby live other members of the Mondavi family, who started the premium California wine trend in an age when the state was producing large quantities of inexpensive, low-quality wines.

Each of 29's products – eye shadows, lipsticks, lip liners, mascara, blushes, powders and foundations – reflect the Napa Valley by name.

Wine Blot, a lip moisturizer with a purple core of grape seed extract is, especially popular, as is Napa Mist, an atomizer of rose water and grape seed extract.

"The valley looks just like this," Mondavi said, popping open a heavy silver case of four eye shadows called Sunset in Napa.

Everything about the valley inspires Mondavi, including Rob's beekeeping hobby: Hint of Honey is a lip moisturizer with flecks of gold.

All of 29's cosmetics are rich and moisturizing, and all protect against free radicals.

"I typically have sensitive skin and grape seed extract is great for improving the texture of the skin and evening out the complexion," Mondavi said, rubbing foundation on the back of her hand to show its immediate benefits. "29 has helped re-bal-

ance and replenish my skin."

Although Napa has played a big role in shaping 29, Mondavi was well aware of the benefits of grape seed extract before she met and married Rob Mondavi, grandson of wine scion Robert Mondavi.

Gazing out over acres of vineyards and sipping wine her husband made inspires her, but it was science that made her company.

"Grape seed extract has been fully researched and supported by numerous clinical studies for over 26 years," she said. "Scientists have discovered that the procyanidins found in grape seed extract are 20 times more efficient than vitamin C and 50 times more efficient than vitamin E as free radical scavengers."

"I think it's the right time, the right market," she added. "Women are very educated about how we eat, how we live our lives."

Mondavi, 34, is a slim and petite blonde. A fifth-generation Atlantan, she made her name designing spas and launching skin care and cosmetics for international brands such as Ralph Lauren.

She met Rob in Atlanta where he had been transferred to handle Mondavi wine exports. They were married at the Mondavi winery less than a year later, the first of the Mondavi family to wed there.

She initially considered opening a spa of her own in Napa. But with her knowledge of cosmetics and skin care and newly inspired by her surroundings, she started work on 29.

"Skin care is a natural for me, but I wanted to release the cosmetic line first," she said.

With 29 fully developed, Mondavi has been traveling around the country introducing the line to Neiman Marcus stores. Since February, when Mondavi launched 29, the line has been hard to keep in stock, even without advertising.

The cosmetics are made just outside of Milan, Italy, then shipped to Georgia where Mondavi's family formed a distribution company.

"My mom and stepdad do all the shipping," she said. "My grandmother Stella does all the bar-coding."

Although most brands pitch an idea for a product and then make it, Mondavi had 29 boxed and ready to go by the time she approached Neiman Marcus.

"When you start a business, you roll the dice and you take a gamble," she laughed.

The store has a special significance for her: when she was a girl, her grandfather gave her a signed copy of "Minding the Store" by Stanley Marcus, co-founder of Neiman Marcus. She's read the book so many times it's dog-eared and falling apart. She hands out new copies to business associates.

Fortunately, buyers at Neiman Marcus felt strongly about 29, too, and the cosmetic line was quickly picked up as an exclusive brand by the luxury department store.

"I remember sitting in the Dallas airport, and I said 'Oh my gosh,

we're going into Neiman Marcus!'" Mondavi said.

Neiman Marcus will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in September, and Mondavi is thrilled to be introducing 29 to a newly built store in Massachusetts. By the holiday season, Mondavi said, 29 will have launched in seven or eight other Neiman Marcus locations.

On a recent visit to the Neiman Marcus store in San Francisco, Mondavi brought bottles of Medusa and Spell-

Wilbanks was responsible for the package design, a combination of shiny silver, matte aubergine, winter white and a rich, cocoa brown.

"The logo is reminiscent of the highway sign," Mondavi said. "The white stitching on the dark brown band represents the road itself."

The road signifies another theme that Mondavi wanted to convey with 29: travel. 29 is displayed at Neiman Marcus in little steamer trunks.

"We want you to take it with you," Mondavi said.

Many items have been specifically designed for travel, like Napa Mist, which is less than the 3 ounces airlines allow in carry-on luggage.

Currently, 29 is developing travel brushes with individual cases, travel-sized foundation, new creme blushes and a line of new lipsticks for fall, holiday, and the 29 signature collections.

Sitting outside her Napa home with a glass of wine in hand, Mondavi described the 29 woman.

"She could be dining at the French Laundry, or walking in the vineyards, or pick-

ing her kids up from the swimming pool," she said. "It's for that well-balanced woman who spends just as much time outside as she does in."

So here's to wine – grape and juice – aimed at women everywhere who are interested in health and beauty, inside and out.



bound wine, made and marketed by her husband, herself and another couple. She also brought small steamer trunk displays for 29 and she brought along her mother, Anita Wilbanks.

Wilbanks, who has worked in skin care, cosmetics and interior design, was instrumental in getting 29 off the ground, Mondavi said, and she's been helping with store launches since February.