



COPIA NEEDS TO GO AWAY

Though Copia, The American Center for Wine, Food & The Arts in downtown Napa, recently fell into bankruptcy in order to reorganize, this bloated shrine to the excesses of food and wine is bad for the culinary world, bad for the wine business and should no longer be allowed to suck up scarce resources. Like those who have suggested General Motors disappear, I believe Copia needs to liquidate its assets, pay its creditors, and simply go away.

The expansive and expensive edifice dedicated to the egos of one man and one woman, Robert Mondavi and Julia Child, was virtually irrelevant the day it opened in 2001. Copia has been a constant economic drain on a now slumping wine industry and the money it has burned through — as much as \$80 million just in building costs — could have funded a five-year Wine Market Council “Got Wine” advertising campaign. Bankruptcy papers say Copia owes creditors between \$50 and \$100 million.

You would have thought that those doing the arm twisting to raise money in support of Copia would have understood that there were already 2,400 mini-Copia’s located throughout the Napa Valley and California.

Those doing the fundraising could have also learned from the late Robert Mondavi’s extravagantly blurred vision that led to the closure of his Wine Center in Costa Mesa and failure of his \$12 million Disneyland venture. Fiscal irresponsibility may have also played a major role in the Mondavi’s having to take their winery public and ultimately lose control of their family wine business, all well documented in Julia Flynn Siler’s book *“The House of Mondavi: The Rise and Fall of an American Wine Dynasty.”*

Why go to a fake “Wine Center” when every California winery tasting room has its own “real” wine education center, complete with wine tastings, food and wine pairings, gardens, movie theaters, vineyard tours, restaurants, concerts, art exhibits and other special events?

To define the economic point even further, why would, say, any Sonoma County winery want to support a wine/food/arts education facility that is essentially preaching to



the choir and located in downtown Napa? Had Copia been successful, it most assuredly would have siphoned off the finite number of wine country visitors from the already established and successful tasting rooms throughout the Napa Valley.

Missteps at Copia have been many, leading to the loss of more than \$4 million each year since opening. Never mind the black and white silhouetted Copia logo of what appears to be a kneeling woman performing a sex act on a grapevine, or an art exhibit of figurines depicting the Pope stooped in the act of defecation, or the endless parade of highbrow wine tastings presided over by a cadre of snooty Master Sommeliers.

Ultimately Copia could not pass the “does anyone care?” test and should be a lesson for anyone believing that Sonoma County needs to have its own such “Center.”

The two most important ingredients in making Copia a success ultimately did not buy into what Robert Mondavi was selling — the supposed unwashed wine consumer waiting to be educated and the cash-strapped wine industry now caught in a recession and quite possibly a depression.

What a monumental waste of time and money. Robert Mondavi and his wealthy friends could have provided a real, long-lasting legacy for the wine industry, but their egos got the best of them.

In a world filled with more than 75 million regular beer drinkers, a few million of them could have easily been persuaded to purchase wine by means of a focused and consistent advertising campaign. A campaign to move beer “fence sitters” over to wine would have been a more sensible approach to the “rising tide lifts all boats” theory preached by the promoters of Copia.

##

Written: 12/08

Published: *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* 12/08