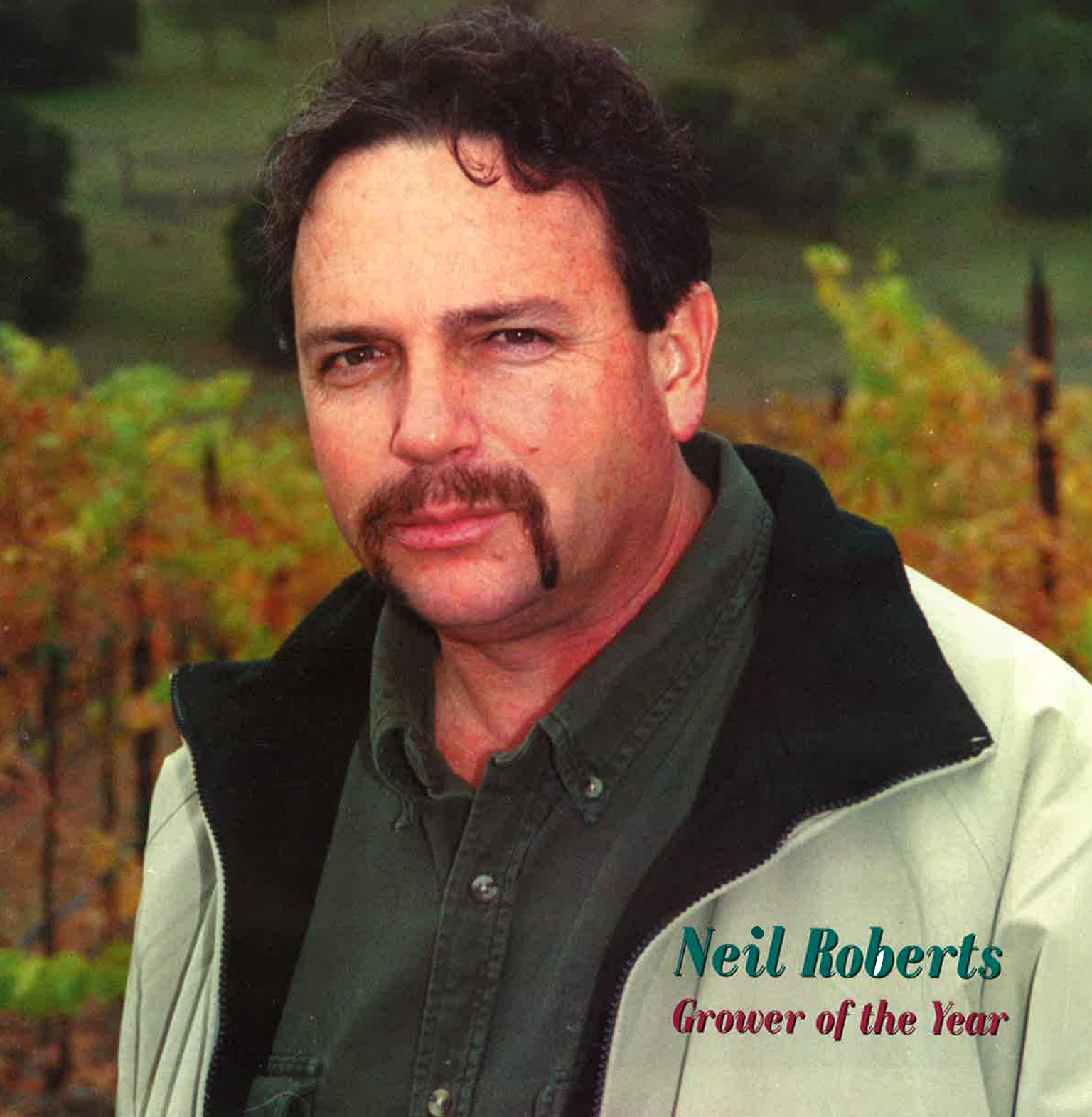


# American Vineyard

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**Neil Roberts**  
*Grower of the Year*

# Neil Roberts

## —Innovator Among the Vines



### *American Vineyard's 2002 Grower of the Year*

*By Patrick Cavanaugh, Managing Editor*

Standing at the top of a vineyard covered hill near Paso Robles, Neil Roberts, of Robert Mondavi Winery makes the statement: "Isn't it beautiful?"

Roberts continues looking out across the unique 1000 acre vineyard known as Cuesta Ridge, an area of rolling hills dotted with magnificent oaks. Without a doubt, it takes close management to oversee this land and other properties on the Central Coast, owned and operated by Robert Mondavi Winery.

It's because Roberts' innovative nature and flexibility to make changes he has earned a reputation of being a top viticulturist in the industry and is recognized as the 2002 Grower of the Year, by *American Vineyard* magazine.

Growing up on a family farm in the Fresno County town of Kerman, Roberts began an early education in growing grapes along with cotton and hay. He later went to California State University, Fresno where he graduated in 1981 with a degree in Crop Science emphasizing agronomy.

Following graduation, he began working for a farm management company in Madera. In 1985, he transferred for the first time out of the Central Valley and into the Central Coast area of Santa Maria, where he continued to work for the Madera company. A short time later he began working for Hampton Farming, a major vineyard management company in the area.

Absorbing all that he could in exper-

ience, Roberts worked for Hampton for eight years and then jumped over to Napa-based Crop Care Associates where he continued working vineyards on the central coast. "I was consulting for different growers as a PCA, and as a viticulturist, said Roberts. In advising growers on irrigation practices and performing many soil studies, his experience in wine grapes increased rapidly. "That was a great experience," said Roberts. "It was different from what I was doing before and I could see wine grape management from a different perspective.

"It was very satisfying work and more diversification in my knowledge and I felt that helping many growers enabled me to develop some good relationships on the way," Roberts said. One client that he was consulting with would eventually give him a job offer that would end up being a dream opportunity. It was Robert Mondavi Winery. In his consulting work, Roberts had been working with Mondavi on their Central Coast ranches doing some soil work on land that they eventually purchased. In doing that work, he met Mondavi's director of grower relations, Robert LaVine. He is now my boss," said Roberts.

"In 1996 they were looking at buying some properties and at the time they had about 400 acres in Santa Maria and they were looking at other properties in the area as well as Monterey County," said Roberts. "They also had acreage in the Shandon and San Luis

Cabernet Sauvignon in one of the vineyard blocks of the Cuesta Ridge near Paso Robles.



Obispo County.”

Since the Robert Mondavi Winery was expanding they approached Roberts and asked him to oversee their property on the Central Coast. That was in Dec. 1996 and today he oversees 11 different vineyards, representing 7,000 acres in Paso Robles, Monterey County and Santa Barbara County.

He works as the viticultural manager and oversees four management companies that take care of the vineyards. He works with these farming companies on all issues from budgets to

irrigation to wine grape quality.

Robert spends most of his time visiting all the vineyard properties and working with their vineyard management companies. “All of them have talented people with a lot of experience and each one brings their own style and diversification. One or another will come up with ideas that we can use on other properties to make improvements.”

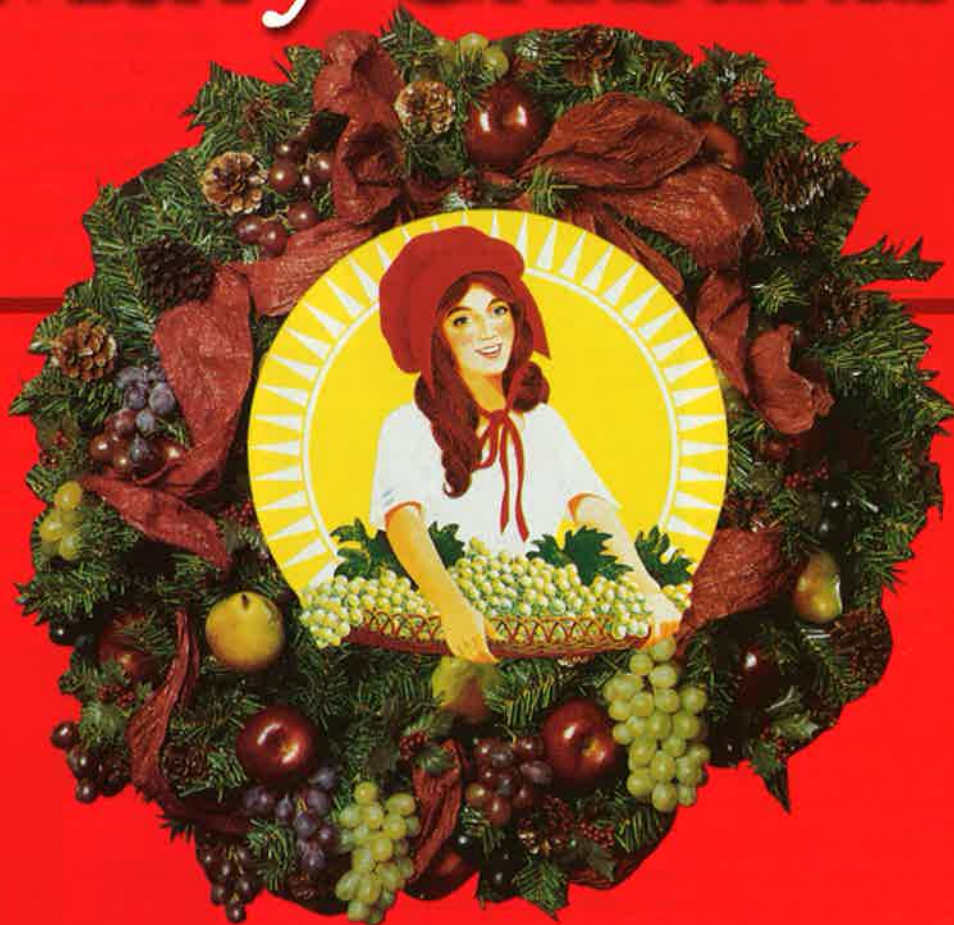
As a company, Robert Mondavi Winery practices sustainable agricultural practices with all their properties

and encourages its management companies to come up with ideas on improving on the sustainable practices.

Some of the practices include using non-conventional fertilizers or there may be different soil management practices and continued evaluation of irrigation regimes. “One of the ranches that we developed south east of Paso Robles is quite a diverse habitat that required a lot of non-conventional work. “The property, known as Cuesta Ridge is basically an oak Savannah and an

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## Neil Roberts

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environmentally sensitive area," said Roberts. "The community voice much concern on how a commercial vineyard would impact the area."

The vineyard dirt roads are seeded with vegetation during the rainy season to offer help in erosion management.

The vineyard was planted in 2000 and the vines follow the rolling contour with sweeping wraps around the standing oaks.

The management companies are doing a good job and aware of the many erosion control practices. "We're using mechanical weed cultivation along with herbicide in the rows. When using herbicides they always try to go with low volume applications," he said.

The fertilizer strategy relies more on humics and liquid composts, which has apparently lead to improved soil health. "Getting away from conventional fertilizers seems to have a very positive effect so we are using less of it and more of the alternatives," said Roberts.

Roberts said the humics are more phosphate-based and the plants seem to take it up better. "We want to enhance soil chemistry and biology. We use compost and gypsum under the vine applications where the vines need it," he said. "That's a trend and it seems to be working and we know this by vine health. We have had deficiencies and have turned them around using these new practices," he noted.

The liquid compost is injected through the drip, has many beneficial properties, and enhances soil health, noted Roberts. "This is building up soil health and it's a long way from simply

applying ammonium nitrate. There is much more science now and the applications are more precise."

Back to Cuesta Ridge, Roberts described a less than conventional weed management strategy: "We're using goats to control star thistle in a wet lands area adjacent to the vineyard. It was either use a herbicide, which wasn't a good idea in the area or mow it, which was less than desirable, and he goats have done a great job," Roberts said. Star thistle is invasive in the area, and the goats get rid of it before it goes to seed. This reduces the seed bank in the wet lands. "We are also going to use feeder geese, which will munch on the seedling weeds in the vineyard and sheep to keep the cover crops down which can really take off when the rains hit.

His experience and reputation of viticultural excellence was recognized even before he joined Mondavi. In 1993, he was Central Coast Wine Growers Association Grower of the Year.

Other extra-curricular activities include his work with the Central Coast Vineyard Team, a winegrower group that was started by growers on the Central Coast to increase sustainable practices. The group has created a positive point system—an evaluation and management tool to evaluate the cultural practices in vineyards. It evaluates soils, water use, insecticide and herbicide use as well as labor in the vineyard.

The best possible score in the evaluation is 1000, which is perfect and impossible to attain, noted Roberts.

Based on questions regarding management, a grower earns the points. The result gives the grower an idea on how

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