



A D V E N T U R O U S

WINE

A R C H I T E C T U R E

TEXT BY MICHAEL WEBB PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERHARD PFEIFFER

QUINTESSA



Valeria Huneus, who has a doctorate in microbiology and a passion for everything that grows, outmaneuvered other suitors for a 250-acre estate in the prestigious Rutherford district. Incredibly, the estate had never been farmed, and she introduced high-density planting, varied root stocks, clonal grafts, vertical trellising and other innovative ideas.

She and her husband, Agustín, a fellow Chilean and veteran vintner, christened their property Quintessa—for its five hills and also in the hope they could develop a premium red of quintessential excellence. In the nine years since they released their first vintage, a blend of selected Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc, they've fulfilled their goal, and they now have a handsome new winery in which they, and winemaker Sarah Gott, can make further improvements.

The owners wanted an inconspicuous structure of simple materials that would blend into the hillside, minimizing the impact of the building on existing vineyards and landscape and employing a gentle, gravity flow system of handling the grapes. "Wine is a statement of place," declared Agustín Huneus, and he chose Walker Warner Architects, a San Francisco partnership, for their sensitivity to this issue, even though they had never before designed a winery. The architects embedded the production areas within a hillside, facing what they called "a natural amphitheater" with a crescent wall of local tufa, mixed with stone from Texas and northern California to pick up on colors in the landscape. The stone arc faces northeast toward the Silverado Trail, and it has a symbolic central portal—steel-framed glass doors that pull natural light into the tank room.

NAPA VALLEY, CALIFORNIA
Walker Warner Architects, 2001–2003

Ramps lead up from either side, and the roof of the winery doubles as the crush pad. Grapes are sorted, funneled through ports and a movable chute to French oak fermentation tanks in the production hall below. These can be accessed from a mezzanine gallery which supports the glass-walled office and lab—the winemaker's command post. The grapes are crushed in a basket press, transferred to barrels, and aged in caves that extend back into hillside for a total of 1200 feet and can be entered through four porches to the rear of the production hall. Huneus set the capacity at 75,000 cases, far in excess of the current annual production of 10,000.

To the rear of the crush deck is a stone-walled central pavilion, lit from a clerestory, and flanked by low office wings in steel-framed glass that are shaded with wood slats and a projecting roof plane. The environmentally conscious design, which includes an irrigated sod roof, thermal mass, and the use of night air ventilation, minimizes the need for heating and cooling. A lofty reception area is furnished as a living room with chairs drawn up to an open fire. Behind this is a warm, intimate tasting/sales room with a steel grid of cork ceiling soffits, stone walls at front and back, poured concrete at the sides, and a polished brown concrete floor with an exposed aggregate. Trenches are clamped to elegant cruciform steel columns, and the wine shelves and bar are made of stacked black walnut. Backlit welfum paintings symbolize the seasons. Natural light spills down around the ceiling soffits onto a stone wall with gridded wood doors leading into the vaulted VIP tasting room, which hints at the caves below. These have a grid plan with a rotunda, marked by an obelisk fountain, and the tunnel leading to this may be used as an art gallery without compromising the temperature and humidity levels of the other caves.

Open daily. Tours by appointment. Tel: +1 707 967 1801, 1801 Silverado Trail, St Helena, California. www.quintessa.com





