

In-Depth



The Quintessential Agustin Huneeus

A veteran winemaker builds a brand-new winery for his Quintessa vineyard **BY TIM FISH**

Agustin Huneeus shoulders open the winery door and steps outside. The cellar darkness gives way to sunlight. "Come, sit on my rock," Huneeus says, pointing to a mighty slab of tufa resting alone in a field.

To go off to a quiet place, a place to reflect—this is quintessential Agustin Huneeus. In fact, quintessential is the word that inspired him to name his vineyard Quintessa. In the wine business for 43 years, Huneeus is a man who clearly contemplated his path and found success in re-creating himself as he went along.

His latest endeavor is the completion of a new multimillion dollar winery, devoted to producing Quintessa, his \$110 (for the current release, 1999), estate-grown, Bordeaux-style blend. It is a far cry from the days when Huneeus largely produced brands such as California's Concannon and Estancia, and Chile's Veramonte and Concha y Toro—wines that sold for \$8 to \$10.

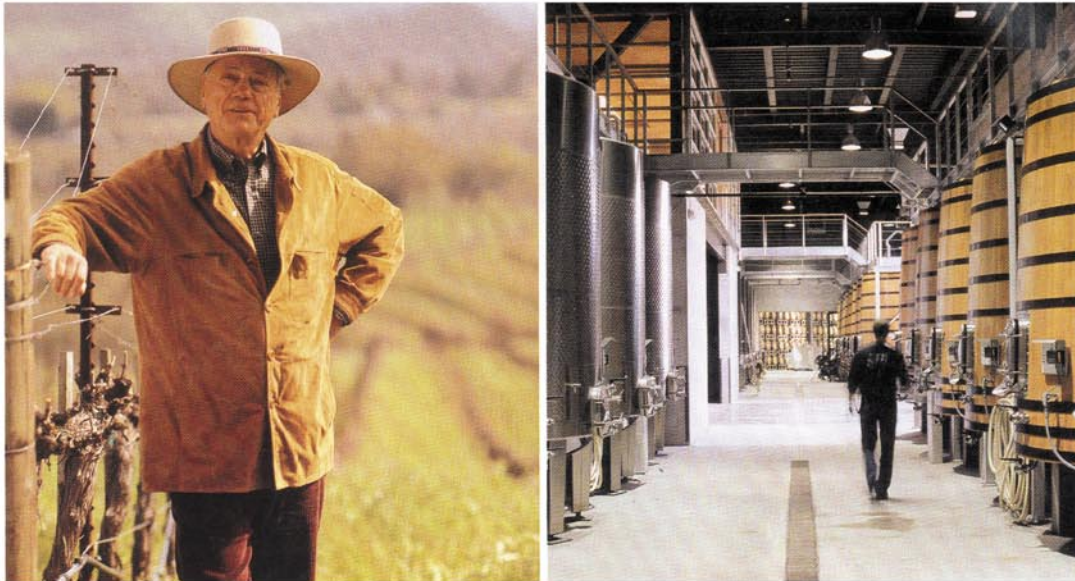
The winery, designed by Walker Warner Architects of San Francisco, hugs a hillside along Silverado Trail near

Rutherford in Napa Valley. The sleek, crescent-shaped edifice is done in elegant tufa rock, crowned by a low-lying modern structure that Frank Lloyd Wright would appreciate. While Huneeus declines to say how much the winery cost to build, the facility is short on ostentation and long on the latest winemaking technology.

The latest, in this case, is not necessarily high-tech, since the current thinking is clearly retro. Winemaking at Quintessa is gravity flow, with grapes funneled into fermentation tanks via skylightlike ports.

Above: This crescent-shaped hillside winery in Napa is the latest addition to Agustin Huneeus' Quintessa vineyard, which he and his wife, Valeria, began developing in 1990. The facility employs the latest in winemaking technology and is devoted to producing Quintessa, Huneeus' estate-grown, Bordeaux-style blend.

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Left: Agustin Huneeus doesn't know how to stand still; he plans to increase Quintessa's production and is also adding a lower-priced second label, which will debut with the 2002 vintage. Right: The state-of-the-art winemaking facility embraces traditional methods such as fermentation in tanks of French oak.

Barrel aging is done in a 17,000-square-foot cave. Winemakers rely on a modern version of the old basket-press and French oak fermentors—albeit temperature controlled—not modern-era stainless steel.

"I [remember] the time when we thought wood tanks were terrible. We threw them out," Huneeus, 69, says. "It's funny how we're going back to the old ways."

The old days for Huneeus date to 1960, when he became CEO of Concha y Toro in his native Chile. While the winery grew to become Chile's largest, the political climate changed when Salvador Allende's socialist government came into power. On Christmas Eve 1971, Huneeus fled to Argentina. Says Huneeus, "I had a couple of hours to go before I would have been arrested."

Huneeus came to the United States in 1973, eventually finding his way to Napa Valley. In 1985, the Eckes family of Germany was trying to unload the floundering Franciscan winery, but Huneeus convinced them to keep it and let him run it. He transformed it into a dynamo of well-priced, highly regarded wine, with labels such as Franciscan, Estancia, Mount Veeder and a back-to-his-roots introduction of the Chilean brand Veramonte.

In 1999, Constellation (formerly known as Canandaigua) bought the company for \$240 million—one of many recent acqui-

sitions that have made Constellation the largest wine company in the world.

But Huneeus kept the Quintessa vineyard, which he began developing with his wife and vineyard manager, Valeria Huneeus, in 1990. He also retained part ownership in Veramonte, as well as vineyards in Napa and Alexander valleys.

The Quintessa winery is an extension of the vineyard, as Huneeus sees it, built to bring out the best of its 180 planted acres. "The size of the tanks," he says, for example, "is dictated by the size of specific blocks of the vineyard."

Since its debut with the 1994 vintage, Quintessa has been praised by *Wine Spectator* for its complexity and elegance; five of its six releases have earned scores of 90 points or higher on the 100-point scale (the 1998 was not reviewed).

The 2002 vintage is a new era in many ways for the winery. Winemaker Sarah Gott came aboard in August, just as the new winery—still under construction—had its first crush. Previously, the winemaking was done at nearby Franciscan, under the consultation of Philippe Melka and Jacques Boissenot.

But Huneeus has never been one to stand pat. Now he's adding a second label to the estate's volume. Even with its growing volume (almost 10,000 cases for

the 1999), the Quintessa blend has traditionally used only 20 percent of the vineyard output; the rest has been sold to Franciscan.

"We expect in the long term Quintessa to increase to 40 percent of the vineyard. The second label could go to absorb up to 50 percent," Huneeus says. The second label, as yet unnamed, will debut with the 2002 vintage and could eventually grow to 35,000 cases.

"It's going to be lower priced," Huneeus says. "In today's market, it's scary to depend on a wine that's in the \$100 price point."

He is also restructuring the vineyard; recently, he pulled out a Cabernet Franc vineyard because the soils made the vines too vigorous. His goal is to achieve the right mix of soils, exposures, clones and rootstocks to produce the style of wine he loves.

"If there is a style of California wine that goes toward the rustic and powerful, we want to get away from that," Huneeus says. "Winemaking in California is getting a little crazy with the alcohol. We're going to extremes. We have to get the tannins to mature with the sugars—not after."

He stops and laughs. "By the way, I have no idea how to do that. I need a couple of lives to figure that out." But no matter where the path takes him, he'll push on, with humor and high hopes. □

MARINE VALED