In the wine business for over 40 years, Augstine and Valeria Huneus are, without a doubt, the quintessential vintners of Napa Valley. Seeing themselves as dedicated stewards of the land promoting soil-sensitive, sustainable and biodynamic viticulture processes, their philosophy for winemaking is that the wine should be known for the property from which it originated, rather than its varietal composition. Together, they have spent more than 14 years developing the Quintessa vineyards from terrain that had never before yielded a single grape, nor any other crop for that matter. In fact, quintessential is the word that inspired them to name the vineyard Quintessa.

The site is in the heart of the Rutherford appellation of Napa Valley’s Silverado Trail and achieves the highly improbable by possessing all the diverse characteristics of a great wine estate: five rolling hills, a lake and a river, several microclimates and a varied mix of soils with limited vigour. With such a strong reverence for what is clearly sacred land, building a state-of-the-art winery and visitors’ centre that would complement the bucolic serenity of the 286-acre Napa Valley estate while also representing the quality and elegance of the Quintessa brand presented a unique challenge.

The winery – which held its grand opening in 2003 – is a perfect extension of the Huneus’ holistic philosophy and is all about the sympathetic integration of architecture, winemaking and landscape. On approach the building is quite subtle; the elegant crescent-shaped wall nestles itself within the contours of the land, and is in fact almost indistinguishable from it. The rough-cut stone captures Napa Valley’s historical palette and is softened by its integration with verdant plantings and nature trees. But the building also makes a dramatic gesture as the 20-foot-high glass doors open to reveal an elegant and functional winery while the outstretched arms forms a natural outdoor amphitheatre for winemaking. Visitors are allowed to view the entire process, starting with the visitors’ centre atop and ending with the wine caves below. With finer details of steel and wood that would make Frank Lloyd Wright set up and take notice the steel, concrete and stone used in the caves reappear in the visitors’ centre which houses the tasting room and library.

Production of the Bordeaux-style blend is now fully on site and employs the gravity-flow process, making full use of the contoured terrain. Trucks swoop up the circular driveway to deliver the grapes to the crush deck on the second level where they are sorted, de-stemmed and lightly crushed. The crushed grapes are then funneled through roof hatches to the fermentation tanks below. The homage paid to the rich environment is ubiquitous; Huneus
relies on a modern version of the basket press and uses French oak fermenters, with the size of the tanks dictated by the size of the specific blocks of the vineyard they service. No stainless-steel tanks here. When fermentation is complete, "wine must" is drained from the tanks to the winepress located in the central hall.

It's no secret that a well-built cave begot a great wine and at Quintessa the barreling caves are the real treat. Clearly the most modern in the Napa Valley, they form an extensive network radiating in three directions. At the point of convergence stands a sentry-like sculptural fountain with a halo of light from above, as it to offer a blessing of thanks for the fruits of the earth. Long orderly rows of barrel line the dimly lit walls, along whose length music wafts. Under the protection of an irrigated green roof, the barrel cave and wine-storage room make use of thermal mass and variable air ventilation for refrigeration. And at over 17,000 square feet, this wonderful low-slung curved edifice will certainly contribute to the recent trend of "wine-cave envy" sweeping the Napa Valley.

The Quintessa vineyard is perhaps one of the most diverse yet carefully conceived grape-growing environments in the Napa region. So as to take full advantage of the varying soil conditions and maintain the land's long-term integrity, Hurewitz has planted a climatic differentiation for each varietal, including European as well as American clones of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

The process is apparently working as the 1996 Quintessa is often talked of as a Californian classic. Since the debut of the 1994 vintage, of which just 1,000 cases of the limited production wine were released, Wine Spectator has honoured Quintessa by awarding five of its six releases 90 points or higher on the 100-point scale. Quintessa now produces approximately 6,000 six-bottle cases annually.

Above: Quintessa. With a network of caves set deep into the hill, this wonderful barrel cave will certainly contribute to the trend in wine-cave envy sweeping the valley.

Left: Quintessa. Early architect renderings show the strong presence of the owners' post-modernist architectural and sculptural processes.