WINE COUNTRY
Architecture and Interiors

MARY WHITESIDES
Foreword by Howard Backen, FAIA
Quintessa Winery

Rustic Contemporary Architecture
Walker Warner Architects
Brooks Walker, principal architect in charge

Set back from the Silverado Trail in Napa Valley and nestled into a hillside, the symmetrically ascending crescent form of the Quintessa Winery comes alive each morning at sunrise. Nature’s light show on this architectural amphitheater embraces its vineyards in the early morning hours as a great theater embraces a captivated audience with a masterful performance; here, it is the performance of wine making.

Quintessa, derived from the word quintessential, means “the essence of a thing in its purest and most concentrated form.” The name was a calculated choice meant to serve as a business philosophy and a mission statement for the architects.
Walker Warner Architects faced a unique challenge in creating a state-of-the-art wine-making facility that could stand up to the meaning of its name. They began by paying special attention to the constraints of the site and roadway presentation, and complemented this with function and efficiency.

From the road the building appears as an elegant curved stone wall inset by one simple portal of glass doors leading to the wine caves and wine-making operations.

The sensuous curve of the sculptural wall is clad with a blend of stone types, including local tufa rock, and grouted with a mixture of pea gravel, in a simple rustic style. The hospitality functions are in the
Left, top: Architect Brooks Walker let the site dictate the shape and function of the building. Here the entrance to the hospitality area of the winery sits atop a hillside above the production facility.

Left, bottom: The steel frame or “skeleton” of the building forms a corner for the clerestory windows in the waiting room. A shed roof protects the room from harsh radiant sun by mollifying the light source.

Right: The tasting room is a study in contrasts. Smooth concrete walls meet a textured concrete floor. Wood, steel, and leather not only set off the hard edge surfaces with deep colors, but also invite the human element to become part of the room.

main building, a rectangular configuration of multiple ceiling heights tucked against the hillside atop the arc of the sculptured wall. Constructed of steel and glass in contrast to the stone wall, one form offsets the other respectively, maintaining a separate integrity.
The reception area centrally located in the main building rises above two adjoining wings. Clerestory windows dress the simplistic concrete walls. Steel beams crossing in front of the corner windows candidly express the contemporary design language. An originally designed chandelier is a halo of textured glass, the crowning glory of the room.

Adjacent to the reception area is the tasting room where a common space accommodates individual tasters. The mood here is directed by backlit paintings that cast a diaphanous glow onto walnut tables and leather stools. Ground concrete floors are in textural contrast to smooth concrete walls and a crosshatched concrete countertop. Elemental light fixtures are lucid markers for intimate
nooks where a glass of wine can be sampled. Quintessa also hosts group connoisseurs in a cave-like chamber where wine is ceremoniously uncorked and tasted.

A private tour of the facility will reveal that the architects, with the help of Quintessa's winemaker, have composed the buildings in such a way as to allow the wine-making
process to be returned to its purist form. By utilizing the hillside they are able to
gravity-feed the “must” into the fermentation tanks, eliminating the need for any
mechanical pumping.

At Quintessa the wine is barrel-aged in French oak and stored in 17,000
square feet of man-made caves. Four cavernous corridors, which make up the
spines of the caves merge into a spherical anteroom with a stone obelisk foun-
tain as the focal point. Another textured-glass chandelier casts an aureole of
light on the wall like giant luminous clouds.

Quintessa winery is a study in contrasts, joining contemporary design
with traditional skills, mass with minimalism, arcs with squares, concrete with
wood, and texture with burnished surfaces. Walker Warner Architects achieves a
yin-yang balance harmonious with nature and concordant with function.