

Fields of Dreams

Wine is not enough: experiential design is the new brand in wineries today.

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ANTHROPOMORPHIC ROBOTS, drones and other digital helpers from Silicon Valley and elsewhere around the globe will undoubtedly do many useful things, such as driving us around.

But what they can't yet do is create emotional experiences.

That skill is still the unassailable realm of humans, and wineries in particular are becoming the latest forums for such experiential design.

Two relative newcomers, the Donum Estate in Sonoma and Martin's Lane, in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, are among the best examples of wineries that blend the ancient art of vinification with modern food, architecture and fine art.

Their ideas are not entirely new. For example, Castello di Ama, a 1970s winery in Italy's Chianti region, began in 1999 to install site-specific art within its vineyards and in the 12th-century hamlet whose buildings it occupies. But ancient stone buildings, no matter how picturesque, cannot offer what modern winery buildings can.

The new wineries — not unlike multifaceted museums built during the 1990s — are specifically designed as congregational cathedral-like spaces where wine, paired with food, can be admired and enjoyed alongside and on par with art. The structures are no longer purely utilitarian and "agricultural" but are essentially theaters, where these art forms, served simultaneously and almost ritually, heighten the senses.

AT THE DONUM ESTATE, set amid hills and Sonoma wetlands, the mesh of wine, food, art and architecture evolved organically. Winegrower Anne Moller-Racke, the former wife of one of the owners of Buena Vista Winery, which was sold in 2011, helped her ex-husband Marcus found Donum shortly after, on the last 200 acres there that the family still owned.

"My passion was always pinot noir," says Moller-Racke, who is from a region in Germany where such wine is produced. So that's what they made, just 150 cases at a time, and quickly garnered the kind of fame that only the best wines command.

"It got nice ratings. We got 95 from the Wine Spectator at a time when ratings were important," Moller-Racke says.

To build a winery around the brand they created, Moller-Racke found other investors, including Allan Warburg, a Hong Kong-based clothing entrepreneur. Three years later, on a whim, "Allan's idea to add sculptures to the property was born," she says.

Within a month of that decision, "Charging Bull" by Arturo Di Modica arrived, and a circle of Ai Weiwei bronzes inspired by the Chinese Zodiac and a giant stainless-steel "boulder" by Paris-based Arik Levy were on the way.

A section of the estate had been a stagecoach stop during the 1870s, and the stone marker remains, alongside accumulating sculptures that now total more than 30 scattered in the rolling landscape. "But it is still farmland," Moller-Racke says.

In 2015 the winery owners and partners began planning several structures with San Francisco architect Matt Hollis. A recently completed tasting room on a knoll, where Moller-Racke used to live in a former dairy building, alludes to agricultural board-and-batten buildings with its shed and gabled roofs. "For the siding we variously spaced the battens closer and farther apart, like lines on a topographical contour map, because that building is about the land," Hollis says. "It makes the flat surface look like it is undulating." The wine production building still taking shape nearby will evoke water and nearby San Pablo Bay, with rain screens of perforated metal to simulate water drops.

Inside the new tasting room building, gallery-like white-walled rooms showcase paintings, and large windows let in light and views of the land. A new annex, built especially to house a weather-sensitive steel spider sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, echoes the same design.

"The Donum Estate is definitely a gallery as much as it is a winery compound," Hollis, who has worked on nearly 40 wineries, including Etude and Inglenook, says. "Here, sculptures seem to drop down regularly from the sky."

The rest of the striking art situated outdoors needs constant maintenance and could be a distraction, but not for Moller-Racke. "I love the land and the art enhances it," she says. "It encourages visitors to walk the property, feel the climate and understand the terroir. Even from inside a building that is not an ostentatious chateau, you can feel and taste quality in all its aspects." An unexpected bonus: in beautifying the site, landscape architect Bob Cleaver introduced a circle of olive trees around Ai Weiwei's bronzes, so now Moller-Racke also harvests olives to make an olive oil with the winery's label.

“The fact that I can even call Donum a wine brand is amazing,” she adds. “We are shipping to consumers directly, thanks to the internet. In the past, small wineries like us could not go to market without a distributor.”

The internet has also brought the winery a new clientele of busy tech millennials, who want the intimate, slowed-down experience that small-scale Donum offers in its modern tasting room.

“The land always had a raw beauty but now it is groomed,” Moller-Racke observes. “With new buildings and art, you can ‘taste’ the surrounding marshland and feel the wind. The interplay of everything is exciting. It is a working farm and also a tasting room gallery with a sculpture park.”



