

Caving in Wine Country

While stem heights and glass colors change with the whims of culinary fashion, the shape of a wine glass has remained essentially the same for several centuries. One could argue it's a design that can't be improved upon—molded for optimal aeration, swirling, sniffing and sipping.

Wineries themselves, on the other hand, are often used as an opportunity for architectural experimentation, since attracting visitors depends partly on atmosphere.



In Napa Valley, wineries have been built in styles ranging from Greek Revival to blobitecture—all in an effort to beckon potential tasters off the road. But recently, several winemakers have decided to create tasting rooms based simply on the most natural habitat for fermenting and aging wine: a cave. I recently visited two architect-designed caves in California wine country and found that the design limitations imposed by such a pared down structure in fact make the visitor experience much more interesting.

CADE

The newest member of the well-known PlumpJack family of wines is CADE, a vineyard set well away from the din of Napa on Howell Mountain. I visited CADE on a rainy, misty day so the views were obscured, but our tour guide told us on a clear day it is possible to see as far as San Francisco.



CADE was designed by architect Juan Carlos Fernandez of Lail Design Group. Unlike Blueline, CADE is not set entirely in a cave—a large entry building was built on the site in front of a series of caves where many of the barrels are stored. A LEED-Gold project, the building is made primarily of concrete, steel, and glass. The exterior has the grandeur of a new, modern building but the interior keeps it simple. The tunnel walls are entirely smooth and mine-style lights create a moody glow.



On our visit, CADE's chefs prepared an elegant tasting and menu, setting us up at a metal table inside the cave. There's no doubt the atmosphere felt luxurious, despite its simplicity, since this dimly-lit heart of the winery is at the center of a dramatic property and the surrounding structures are brightly lit and beautifully furnished. Our visit preceded CADE's official opening, but they told the visiting press that when all is up and running, the vineyard will employ organic farming practices and the facilities will run on solar power.

The subterranean architecture trend will not likely overtake Napa any time soon (although in terms of apocalyptic visions, this is future-proof design); the third stop on this recent tour was Hall Wines, where a new Frank Gehry-designed megabuilding is getting underway and it's anything but spare. But whether the cave approach gains ground or not, these two spots are well-executed examples of meeting ancient, passive techniques with modern taste, and focusing oenophiles' attention where it ought to be: on the wine.