

After weathering quake, landslide and fire, Hess Collection reopens historic wine cellar

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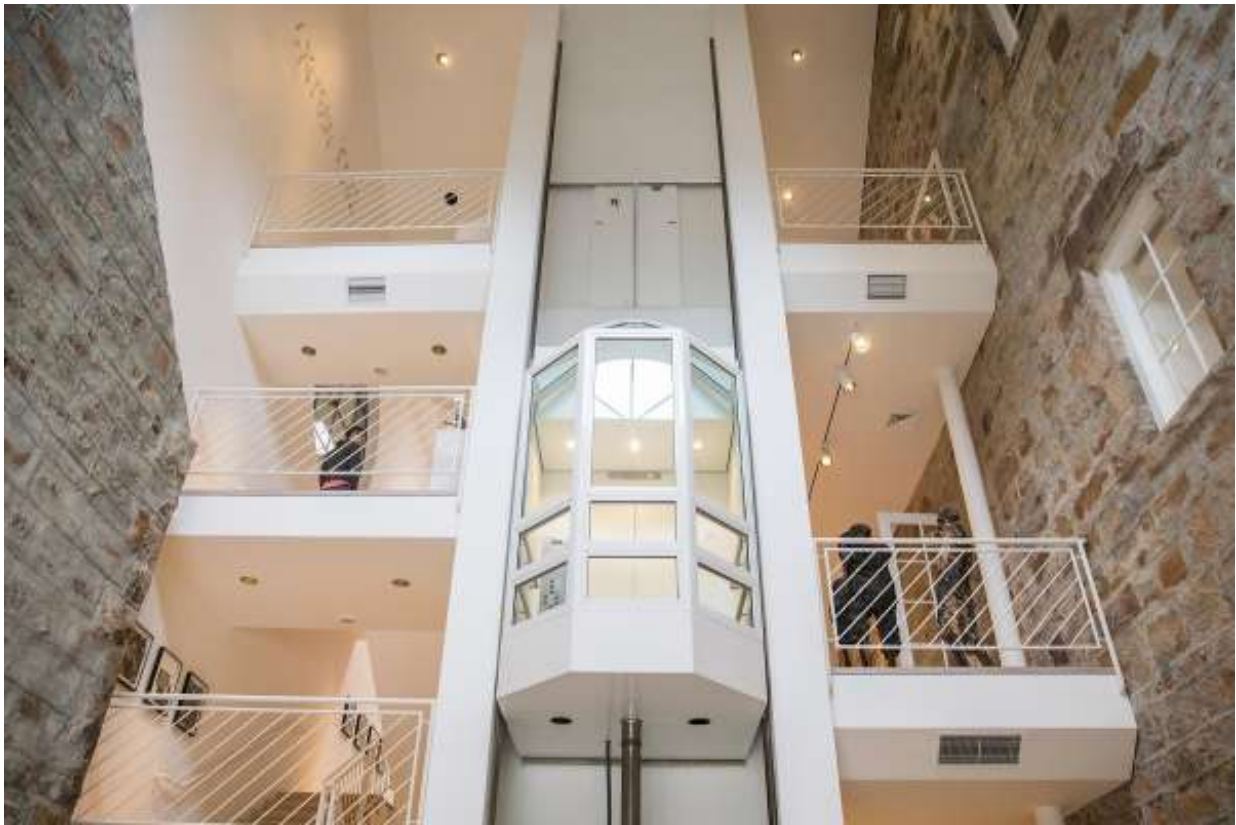
1 of 10 Christine Weber (left) and Paul Elz of Luxembourg sip wine during a tasting at Hess Collection Winery in Napa. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



2 of 10 Rows of grapevines soak in the sun in the main vineyard of Hess Collection Winery in Napa. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



3 of 10 A variety of pieces sit inside the art gallery at Hess Collection Winery in Napa. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



4of 10A glass elevator leads guests up to the two-story art gallery inside Hess Collection Winery.Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



5of 10Workers install a new iron sign in front of Hess Collection in late AugustPhoto: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

6 of 10 Tourists from New York walk through the Hess Collection art gallery. The museum is as much of a draw for visitors as the wine. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



7 of 10 Chad Hendrickson has been the Hess executive chef for many years, and he now has two commercial kitchens to work with on the property. With the new Lion's Head cellar complete, he can offer wine-and-food pairings in the gardens. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



8 of 10 “Johanna II,” a 1986 painting by Swiss artist Franz Gertsch, is among the works at Hess Collection’s art museum. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



9 of 10 Leopoldo Matel’s “Homage, 1974” is one of the works in the Hess art museum most frequently photographed by visitors. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

California, but the fruit from Mount Veeder comprises its highest-end bottles.)

That came after a landslide during 2016's winter floods, which made the road to Hess impassable and impeded all winery operations for 10 days. For a winery that sees 40,000 visitors a year, closing for even a few days represents a major loss of revenue.

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Still, neither of those events came close to the devastation that Hess endured from 2014's 6.0-magnitude earthquake, which spilled tens of thousands of gallons of the vintage's new wine and toppled Cellar One, its 50-year-old winery.

"We're just waiting for the locusts at this point," says CEO Tim Persson.

But now Hess is back, at long last. Just before Labor Day, the company unveiled Lion's Head, its new winery and tasting room, a \$5 million renovation of the building destroyed by the earthquake. The cavernous, high-ceilinged structure, previously full of antique winemaking equipment, received a complete makeover, with state-of-the-art tanks and modern, light-filled private tasting rooms.

It may have taken four years to get it back up and running, but the Hess team believes it was worth it for the upgrade.

"If there was one spot for the earthquake to hit, this was the spot that needed renovation," says director of winemaking Dave Guffy.



Winemakers Dave Guffy (left) and Randle Johnson sip by the ivy wall of the Hess art gallery, housed in a building from 1903.

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Swiss mineral-water magnate Donald Hess founded his eponymous winery in 1989, but the story of this Mount Veeder property stretches back a century earlier. One H. Hudemann first built a winery and vineyard here in the late 19th century; the subsequent owner, Col. Theodore Gier, expanded the infrastructure to support a successful larger-scale wine business. In 1903, Gier built the stone building that today houses Hess' art museum.

The Christian Brothers — a Catholic order that was once Napa Valley's largest wine producer — bought the land in 1930 and made wine here for decades. The Brothers, whose retreat center is next door, remain the property owners and lease the land to Hess.

Until 2014, Hess' winemaking team was still using the original Christian Brothers tanks — antiquated 10,000-gallon vats that lacked contemporary temperature-control technology. When the earthquake hit, the vats collapsed, releasing their entire contents of new wine. Just-filled barrels tumbled over. All that liquid spilled out the cellar doors, staining the sandy ground of the gardens outside blood red.

"I'd estimate we lost 42,000 gallons of wine in less than 10 minutes," Guffy says.

The painstaking renovation required builders to remove each stone, re-grout it and pour new cement between the walls, one by one. Now, having restored the structure and retrofitted the entire complex, the new Hess cellar looks thoroughly modern, with standard 5-ton tanks plus a commercial kitchen and sleek, glass-walled tasting rooms overlooking the production area.

But a memento of Aug. 24, 2014, remains: one of the old Christian Brothers tanks, preserved in its distorted, seismically crunched shape, smack-dab in the middle of the cellar floor.



A crushed wine tank that sustained damage in the 2014 earthquake serves as a reminder in the middle of the new Lion's Head cellar.

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

As always, the damage could have been worse. In both the earthquake and the fires, Hess' art gallery was spared, despite being housed in a 115-year-old structure. The renowned art collection, which features works by artists like Andy Goldsworthy, Frank Stella and Robert Rauschenberg, is as much of a draw for visitors as Hess' wine. Because of the way the fault line runs through the property, the quake hit Cellar One first, and it bore the brunt of the force.

(Hess had no problem finding other places to make its wine while Lion's Head was under renovation: It has four other wine production areas on the Mount Veeder property, plus a winery in American Canyon.)

Losing 42,000 gallons of Cabernet in 2014 was bad enough. But Hess was not prepared for 2017, when the Nuns Fire came to the mountain in early October. More than 25 percent of its prized Mount Veeder grapes were still hanging on the vine.

"The fire went slowly," Persson says. "The fruit hung in smoke here for weeks."

The verdict was clear: smoke taint, a death sentence for wine grapes.

“The grapes had a strong Laphroaig taste,” Persson says jokingly, referring to the famously smoky Scotch whisky.

Cal Fire used the Hess property as a staging ground for fighting the Nuns Fire, parking 15 fire trucks around the winery. They used Hess’ water, supplied from nearby springs, to combat the flames.

While the fire was raging, the winemaking team was unable to come to the winery for 19 days. They had 20 fermentations in process in the cellar and couldn’t perform any pumpovers — a requisite process to extract color and tannins from grape skins into their juice.

They made the difficult decision to not release any of the Mount Veeder red wine from the 2017 vintage.

“It’s frustrating,” Persson says, “but you work hard for decades to earn your reputation, and you can eff it all up if you release one bad vintage.”



Fish swim in a canal outside of the main cellar at Hess Collection Winery in Napa, Calif. Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2018.

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Now, as the 2018 harvest begins to move, things are looking calm and bucolic on Mount Veeder. The scene at the Hess Collection is lovelier than ever, too, now that Lion’s Head is up and running, and ready to receive its first fruit.

Thanks to its commercial kitchen, Hess can now host visitors for wine-and-food pairings just outside the Lion’s Head doors, in the garden that was once stained red with Cabernet.

Hess remains an uncommonly accessible winery for Napa Valley, a place where it's possible to walk into a tasting bar, take an ATV tour through the vineyards or just see the art (admission to which has always been free).

Look at Hess today, and you might never know all that the property has weathered in the past four years — until you see that enormous crunched tank in the middle of the cellar.

“It’s certainly tested us,” Persson says, reflecting on recent years. “I’d be lying if I didn’t say we questioned what we were doing several times. We’ve been fighting uphill, but this year it feels like we’ve finally broken through.”

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