

Some Italian wineries are gaining as much notice for their designs as for their wines.

How about an architect with that glass of wine?

By Kate Singleton

CASTIGLIONE DELLA PESCAIA, Italy
Does commissioning a famous architect to design a winery raise that cellar's public profile? Not literally, since much of a modern cellar is underground. Yet the introduction of tasting rooms and a sales counter for visitors is an attraction that certainly contributes to overall image. Especially if these facilities embody particular architectural aplomb.

Over on the Tuscan coast, in the area known as the Maremma, quality winemaking is a relatively new and highly promising endeavor that has given rise to the construction of some surprising new cellars.

Outstanding among these is the Petra winery near Suvereto, designed by the Swiss architect Mario Botta. It was built at the behest of the Moretti family, producers of the delectable Bellavista sparkling wine in the northern Franciacorta growing area, but first and foremost major players in the construction industry. With his new winery, Vittorio Moretti clearly intended to make a statement that voiced both his interest in wine and his core business.

The building does indeed stand out. Its sloped, circular central element recalls the heart of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, also designed by Botta. Faced in a rough-hewn pink stone from Verona, it arises from the Maremma hillside like the high temple of some great bygone civilization.

The main entrance is on the lowest level, where the towering steel fermentation vats are located. Soaring, deep-blue walls, a slanted roof in engineered wood and narrow, clerestoried windows create a cathedral-like atmosphere. The Sanctum sanctorum is the dramatically lit aging cellars, in which a robed high priest would not seem amiss.

Yet there's a distinctly practical sub-theme at Petra: the floor panels, columns and arches are all prefabricated elements produced and patented by the Moretti construction business. As for the space devoted to enjoying the estate's excellent wine, it is located in separate premises. The tasting rooms and sales outlet are pleasantly low key and welcoming.

Twenty minutes south, near Castiglione della Pescaia, there is another winery geared to attract as much attention for its design as for its wines. Rocca di Frassinello is the work of Renzo Piano. Seen from the vineyards below, his creation appears as a low-lying, brownish-red blank wall featuring a slim rectangular tower that recalls the ancient watchtowers dotting the Maremma coast. Dug deep into the ground, the design centers on the tiered, aging cellar. Square in shape, its steel-reinforced cement vault achieves an impressive 40-meter, or 130-foot, span unencumbered by columns. The lighting is theatrical: beams illuminate a central arena below, while an audience of 2,500 barriques, or barrels, occupies flights of steps on all sides.

Back at ground level, the winery is more overtly modernist, with plenty of plate glass, steel stays and metal grid work for stairways and overhang. The hallmark color is bright green, alternated with other primary hues that are mirrored by glass walls. There are airy offices and professional tasting rooms of clinical modernity.

The public part of the building is at the summit: a spacious, panoramic glass box, clearly a cousin of the lobby of Piano's recently inaugurated New York Times building in New York. Equipped with counters for tasting and sales, the reception area opens onto the vast, brick-paved forecourt where the harvested grapes are delivered. Beyond are vineyards and woodland.

Not all new cellars speak in such emphatic terms. Until recently, the workings of the Marchesi Mazzei winery near Castellina in



Chianti were largely contained within the ancient walls of the Castello di Fonterutoli, the historic family home. Just in time for the 2007 vintage, the Mazzeis inaugurated spacious new cellars built below the castle, overlooking a glorious view of woodland.

The building was designed by Agnese Mazzei, architect daughter of Marquis Lapo Mazzei, president of the family estate. Conversant since childhood with all aspects of winemaking, Agnese Mazzei has become a specialist in winery design.

Building at Fonterutoli required digging 17 meters into the rocky hillside to ensure that two thirds of the 9000 square-meter, or nearly 97,000 square-foot edifice would be below ground. This has meant putting gravity to good use, allowing wine to flow down from one container to another without the need for pumping, also providing temperature and humidity control.

At one end of the underground aging cellars are sheer walls of rock moistened by rivulets of water from which small stalactites have formed. This theatrical work of nature provides ideal conditions for the wines quietly slumbering in the wooden casks. The lighting manages to be functional and gentle. "I am particularly interested in the use of light," said Agnese Mazzei. "Harsh lighting doesn't agree with aging wines. But the tasting rooms are filled with natural light and a "sense of airy prospect."

Lapo Mazzei hopes to use the new tasting facilities not only for oenological appreciation, but also to host encounters revolving around economy and agronomy, the balance of which has been his lifelong passion.

A splendid iron gate designed by the sculptor Pietro Consagra provides an arresting introduction to the new Badia a Coltibuono cellars at neighboring Gaiole in Chianti. The building was designed by Piero Sartogo and Nathalie Grenon, who worked closely with the winery's director Emanuela Stucchi Prinetti.

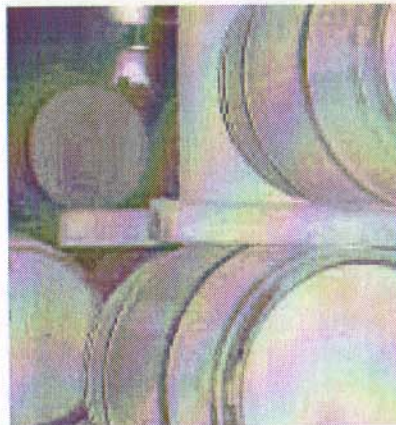
The location is just down the road from the historic abbey where Lorenza de'Medici, Stucchi Prinetti's mother, founded the famous cooking school and restaurant. The front elevation comprises two rotund, tower-like structures. Vaguely reminiscent of a fortress, they enclose the tall steel fermentation vats. The facade features mellow pink brick, ivory-colored plaster and dark gray elements in stone and iron. Both handsome and functional, the 2,000-square-meter building will gain in coming years by the addition of further facilities, including enlarged tasting rooms.

Back on the coast, excavation is about to begin for Marquis Lodovico Antinori's new winery, the Tenuta di Biserno at Bibbona, slightly north of Bolgheri. Designs are by Gae Aulenti, whose achievements include such ur-

ban landmarks as the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

"I spent a long time mulling over the implications of architecture in such a beautiful natural context," said Aulenti, "I finally drew inspiration from the outline of a village on a neighboring hillside. What I designed had to arise from the land as unobtrusively as that."

The model for Aulenti's design suggests architectural reserve. Following decades of experience as a successful winemaker with the Ornellaia estate, Antinori already has public profile aplenty. This is cellar design that seeks to mirror terroir rather than the winemaker.





Architecture is giving Italian wineries new flash. From left, the tasting room at the Marchesi Mazzei winery in Fonterutoli, Italy, designed by Agnese Mazzei; gentle lighting spilling over the barrels in Mazzei's cellar;