



CALIFORNIA FORUM

New museum in Bordeaux shares story of wine and culture from France to Napa

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In this time of global and national turmoil, France's new museum, the Cité du Vin, is uplifting and reassuring.

Built in Bordeaux, on the banks of the Garonne River, the museum is a stunningly conceived swirl of wood and metal that rises 10 stories above the river, with a commanding view of the city and its environs from the belvedere and bar on the uppermost floor.

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Inside, the space ranges from monumental to intimate and houses a permanent and revolving art exhibit, 127 interactive experiences which are visual, auditory and sensory, plus an auditorium named after American president (and oenophile) Thomas Jefferson.

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Before my visit, I thought the museum, located in the heart of France's most famous wine region, would focus exclusively on all things Bordeaux, but I was wrong. Instead, the museum is expansive in its inclusiveness, and I found this feeling to be a positive antidote to the flood of divisiveness that seems rampant in many societies today.

The underlying theme of the Cité du Vin, is that the culture of wine is shared worldwide, "through the ages, across cultures and civilizations," to quote the museum's brochure.

The history of grape growing and winemaking, from its origins in Mesopotamia 6,000 years ago to California's Napa Valley and Tasmania's northern coast, is presented with a cinematic 360-degree screen rising 30 feet. The narrative that accompanies the changing images on the screen gives the experience of depth as well as a sense of how pervasive grapes and wine are to the global human experience.

When watching the varied landscapes all over the world where grapevines flourish and wine is made, I felt a sense of community that reached across the centuries to the present to link us all together.

The museum, in an early review, was labeled "Disneyland for Wine Lovers," which led me to expect a fun, but not serious experience. As much as I love Disneyland, I was thrilled to find the Cité du Vin experience more like an extended university class taught and curated by creative and brilliant teachers using all the senses to engage their students.

One of my favorite lessons occurred around the Table of Terroirs, where 50 different winemakers and grape growers from 10 different wine regions around the world spoke about their particular winegrowing and winemaking practices.

As I stood in front of the table labeled Napa, California, I watched as images of Napa vineyards and landscapes emerged on the slanted table, and then offered a menu of interviews to choose from. Genevieve Janssen, director of winemaking at Robert Mondavi Winery; Pauline Lhote, winemaker at Domain Chandon; and winegrape grower Andy Beckstoffer were on the list. I listened to them all. As each person appeared and began to speak, images specific to his or her story appeared on the digital table, illustrating each interview. It was entrancing.

Thanks to headphones that can be set to eight different languages, I could listen to any of the personages represented from around the world, regardless of the language they were speaking. I could have spent all day at this one exhibit.

The museum, which opened in June, was the creative result of architects from the Parisian firm XTU and the English museum design experts at Casson Mann. I had the opportunity to interview Gary Shelley, the director of Casson Mann, about what was behind the creation of the interactive experiences. He described the years of work on the museum as a collaborative effort, where architectural design and interior exhibits and technology cooperated to ensure a smooth blending of the diverse design elements.

“The content came first,” he told me, “then the architecture. It was iterative.”

Georgianne Brennan is an award-winning cookbook author who has lived in France and writes frequently about its food and culture. Her latest book is “My Culinary Journey – food and fetes of Provence.” Contact her at gbrennan@georgiannebrennan.com

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