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GREEN LIVING

Building echoes winemaker's ideals

New eco-sensitive facility furthers commitment of Healdsburg's James MacPhail to natural methods

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James MacPhail is a small-batch pinot noir producer who has won fans and followers with his meticulously made wines since 2002. In the process, he's also gained recognition for his devotion to natural winemaking, an aim to intervene as little as possible with what Mother Nature provides.

So when it came time to build a winery of his own, it was important that the winery be as environmentally sensitive as his wines.

"This little winery allows me to fine-tune my winemaking," MacPhail said, "crafting small lots with traditional techniques, minimal intervention and hands-on attention."

It also was especially important to keep in mind the immediate environment because the winery was to be built in his own back yard — on a one-acre parcel in rural Healdsburg where MacPhail and his young family live.

For such a personal project, MacPhail chose architect Ron Verdier of Boonville, a longtime friend and owner of Fratley Shams Vineyard in Anderson Valley, one of MacPhail's grape sources.

"MacPhail wanted the new winery to blend in with the rural farmland setting," Verdier explained. "Vernacular images of rural barns and utilitarian structures became the starting point."



John Burgess / PRESS DEMOCRAT
The MacPhail Family Wines warehouse incorporates steel siding and natural lighting.

Verdier has more than 10 years' experience in residential, theatrical and commercial architecture design and consulting. He is also a visual artist who sits on the board of the Arts Council of Mendocino County. But it is his hobby as a home winemaker that helped inform the design of MacPhail Family Wines, a project four years in the making.

"I understand the process of winemaking," Verdier said. "And my experience in farming helps me to design wineries; to make a cabernet sauvignon is different than a pinot and the winery reflects the style in which James would make his wine."

With that understanding, Verdier put together the blueprints for what is today MacPhail Family Wines, a 4,400-square-foot, L-shaped structure, bathed in natural light and affixed with night-cooling fans. The architect works to incorporate natural daylight whenever possible, which adds to the building's efficiency and reduces operating costs.

"Building modest is a philosophy we incorporate in every choice we make throughout the design process," he said. "It's our hope that these choices resonate in the language of our buildings. Natural daylight gives the occupant a feeling of well being, health and comfort."

The fermentation room at MacPhail has south-facing clerestory windows running the length of the room, a high wall with a band of narrow windows along the very top. A large overhang cuts off any direct sunlight, which helps to avoid heat gain. High windows in the gable end bring in morning light and skylights help to give the room a natural day-lit atmosphere.

In winery design there is a delicate balance between the values of natural light and the reduction of heat gain, especially in the barrel room, where a high thermal containment is necessary, Verdier said.

Solar panels will soon be added to the south-facing roof just below the clerestory windows. The roof has a "cool roof" feature that reflects nearly as much heat as it absorbs, which means less heat gain for the building.

Scaled for small-batch winemaking, the winery's walls enclose 10 six-ton French oak and stainless-steel fermentors as well as a separate barrel room, where 270 French oak barrels are stacked to the ceiling. Corridors of river rock sit between the barrel rows.

MacPhail grew up in Marin County, where since the 1880s members of his family have been involved in business and farming. His mother grew up on a dairy farm in western Sonoma County; he spent his childhood summers traveling the world. After a stint in the hotel business, he turned his attention to wine, working with such noted Sonoma County vintners as Merry Edwards and Gary Farrell to hone his passion for pinot.

He hand picks and hand sorts the grapes he buys from various vineyards in the Anderson Valley and Sonoma Coast appellations. His philosophy from the time the grapes come in is minimal intervention. As such, he relies on native yeasts for fermentation and traditional winemaking methods, including gentle punch-downs by

hand, barrel aging in French oak, no fining and no filtration.

Equally important was the ability to eliminate his previous commute to a custom-crush facility 16 miles away.

“Having the winery in his back yard meant reducing his daily commute from 30 minutes to 30 seconds,” explained Verdier, who also runs his business from a home office. “Allowing more time for important matters such as crafting his wines and spending time with his two young daughters, that to me is part of being green and sustainable.”

The goal for sustainability also included the construction of wetlands just outside the winery that reclaim the winery wastewater. The project is the work of Heather Shepherd, a local wastewater specialist.

The grasses in the wetlands pull out remaining sugars and metals, helping oxygenation of the gray water. Shepherd, an expert in the field of wetland systems, previously had designed subsurface wetlands for Imagery Estate, Benziger Family Winery and Fetzer. Put very simply, the water that gets processed through a constructed wetland typically has less algae and is thus better for the soil MacPhail uses his for irrigation.

“We tell our clients, first and foremost in building sustainably is to be modest,” Verdier said. “We continually strive for ways to use fewer materials, develop a small and efficient building footprint and use a highly efficient mechanical system and building envelope.”
