

HESS PERSSON

E S T A T E S

THE PASSING OF ENTREPRENEUR, VINTNER, AND ART COLLECTOR, DONALD M. HESS, (1936-2023)

(Napa, Calif.)— January 31, 2023—Donald M. Hess, entrepreneur, vintner, and art collector, passed away peacefully in Bern, Switzerland, on January 30, 2023, at 86. Known for his infectious curiosity, zest for life, pioneering spirit, and masterful storytelling – qualities that helped Donald build an iconic mineral water company, along with esteemed sustainably-focused wineries in Napa and Argentina, in a career that spanned almost 60 years.

Arriving in Napa Valley in the late 1970s, hoping to expand his European mineral water business, he was instead captivated by wine – a love affair that changed the course of his life. He was drawn to the rugged hills of Mount Veeder, believing that mountain slopes were unsurpassed in quality grape production. Donald first acquired 700 acres of land on Mt. Veeder in 1978 and established The Hess Collection that year, developing 200 acres into vineyard land. The first Hess Collection wines were produced in 1983, and in 1986, he secured an additional 70 acres on Mt. Veeder, which included a historic winery dating back to 1903. After a multi-year rehabilitation and renovation of the winery building, The Hess Collection winery, along with a two-story art gallery dedicated to displaying a portion of Donald’s contemporary art collection, opened in 1989. Donald later played a pivotal role in establishing the Mount Veeder AVA in 1993.

Over the last 45 years, The Hess Collection has become a cornerstone of sustainably grown California Cabernet Sauvignon. Donald Hess’s approach to farming was steadfast: “Nurture the land, return what you take.” The Hess Collection held the first sustainable farming symposium in Napa County in the early 1990s. As a member of the Wine Institute, The Hess Collection helped to establish a standardized and certifiable definition of sustainable wine growing practices. Today, the winery owns four estate vineyards within the Napa Valley, totaling approximately 900 planted acres.

In the late 1990s, driven by his passion for wine and love of adventure, Donald Hess traveled to Argentina. High up in the mountains of Salta, he found a small 150-year-old winery – Bodega Colomé, his “diamond in the rough.” He and his wife Ursula Hess moved to Argentina, working for over a decade to rehabilitate the vineyards and transform the winery. They expanded the business with further vineyard acquisitions around the Calchaquí valleys, including the Altura Maxima vineyard, which sits at an altitude of 10’200 feet. Today, Bodega Colomé has four estates totaling 370 acres under vine at an average altitude of 8,000 feet. Donald’s legacy in Argentina is also reflected in Bodega Amalaya, established in 2010 in Cafayate, Salta. Donald also founded the esteemed James Turrell Museum at Bodega Colomé, which houses nine of Turrell’s immersive light installations – the world’s largest installation of the artist’s work.

Before his devotion to wine began, Donald Hess had already become an art collector. His enduring curiosity for contemporary art and the emotions behind pieces helped him forge lifelong friendships with several artists; for example, he credited Swiss painter Rolf Iseli as the friend who opened his eyes to the necessity of sustainability. The Hess Collection art gallery in Napa and the James Turrell Museum in Salta are vibrant reminders of his belief in the synergy between collector and work, artist and collector, and ultimately an artist and their work.

Donald Hess is survived by his wife Ursula, his daughter Alessandra, his stepdaughters Larissa, and Sabrina, and five grandchildren.

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