

[« Back](#) | [Print](#)

## Perfect Pairing

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By *Edie Cohen* -- *Interior Design*, June 1, 2012

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Orlando Diaz-Azcuy had done it all. Or almost. Commercial and residential interiors, furniture and textiles, even a master's in landscape architecture. But never a winery, which seems somewhat strange given the proximity of the *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member's San Francisco home base to the great wine-making valleys northward. Howard Backen, on the other hand, had 30 wineries to his credit. With Ram's Gate Winery, a joint effort between Backen, Gillam & Kroeger Architects and ODA Design Associates, the latter's portfolio is essentially complete.

Ram's Gate sits on 137 spectacular hillside acres with a view stretching to the San Francisco Bay. And it gets better—the vineyard is the first one that's open to the public on the "wine trail" from the city to Sonoma and Napa. Architecture-wise, Backen's barn-style buildings are primarily clustered around an entry courtyard. He constructed them, inside and out, from cedar planks already weathered by five snowy Wisconsin winters. "All the wood came from one incredibly long fence," he says. From the exterior, the buildings look like clones, with roof shingles also in cedar and door frames in gray powder-coated aluminum. Concrete flooring is ubiquitous, too.

It's the 21,000 square feet of interiors that differ according to function. The tasting room and the library, on opposite sides of the courtyard, are obviously public-oriented, with a hospitality bent. They're linked by a lounge that's open on the courtyard-facing elevation but glassed in on the outer elevation, for windscreen purposes, and sheltered by a peaked roof. Furnished both with sofas and with dining tables and chairs, the lounge is an additional spot for sipping the chardonnays and pinot noir made on-site, in additional cedar structures. In front of the hall for aging wine, a simple ipe table and benches create a high-design picnic area.

Want more options? Meander over to the lakeside, where Ram's Gate provides blankets to ward off the late-afternoon chill. These venues—and more—embody the vision of managing partner Jeff O'Neill of O'Neill Vintners & Distillers. "Besides being gentle and smart, Jeff is the son of an interior decorator. He knows what class is," Diaz-Azcuy says, going on to credit O'Neill with a keen business sense. Having bought the property from the Roche Winery, he set about positioning the Ram's Gate facility and mail-order wine club to be enjoyed by a privileged clientele accustomed to luxury travel, spas, and general cossetting. Diaz-Azcuy is quick to note, however, that his interiors in no way pour on the pretentiousness. Casual and rural rule the day. "Nothing hard or edgy. I designed furnishings and cabinetry to be unique but not screaming look at me," he says. Left unsaid is his high level of sophistication, inherent to every project. A showpiece is the tasting room's pair of 22-foot-long bar counters in Calacatta marble. White marble with red wine? "Jeff believes in the natural patina that time creates on things," Diaz-Azcuy assures us.

Furthermore, the built-ins and custom items mix with plenty of retail purchases unabashedly less expensive.

White stands out amid the shades of gray. Next to the bars in the tasting room, he grouped armchairs, in tufted white vinyl, on an oval of dark sisal. There's an arrangement of similar armchairs in the library, wrapped by bookcases and wine storage. The room's real score, though, is the set of vintage dining chairs attributed to Ole Wanscher— and coincidentally covered in white leather. "I purchased 14 of them for \$18,000 at auction in Copenhagen," Diaz-Azcuy says. "White is fresh. It's the only 'color' I used throughout." With a few exceptions. In the library, for example, the generous sofa is crimson. Introducing tones of muted yellow and blue in the intimate "parlor" off the tasting room is a limited edition artist-designed tapestry identical to one he happened to spot in a San Francisco restaurant.

John Hutton's teak barrel chairs, Northern California classics, gather in front of the fireplace on the library's veranda, which serves as a smoking lounge. To accompany the banquet table in the private dining room, adjacent to the immaculate cellar in the wine-aging hall, Diaz-Azcuy chose his own rattan armchairs, upholstering their backs in delicate cotton damask and fronts in spill-resistant vinyl. The chairs are among the 25 designs he currently has in production—a record anyone would be proud of. Still, he toys with the idea of adding fashion to his repertoire, and Ram's Gate is his low-key debut. He helped design the servers' uniforms, a cool ensemble of blue jeans, white button-front shirts, and vests of gray-and-white ticking.

[« Back](#) | [Print](#)

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