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Volcanoes inspired this renegade winery's new Sonoma tasting room

By **Jess Lander**, Wine reporter
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Obsidian Wine Co.'s new Sonoma tasting room, called Obsidian Base Camp, opens Thursday. Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

One of San Francisco's hottest restaurant designers, known for Bay Area gems Tartine, Liholiho Yacht Club and Delfina, has made his foray into Wine Country.

Renegade California winery Obsidian Wine Co. hired architect Seth Boor, famous for bringing warmth and light to rustic and industrial environments, to design Sonoma's newest tasting room, which is also Boor's first winery project.

Obsidian co-founder Arpad Molnar said the fact that Boor had not worked with a winery before "was critical," for he doesn't want the winery's new home to feel like the hundreds of other tasting rooms in Wine Country. Named Obsidian Base Camp, the nature-inspired space with soothing tones and Japanese design elements opens Thursday, May 23.

Obsidian has always done things differently from its peers. The winery, founded in 2002, was an early adopter of the style of wine that's suddenly trending today — serious yet balanced, fresh and food-friendly — and its founders waited 20 years for consumers to move on from the era of big Cabernet. Though based in Sonoma, most of Obsidian's wines come from a mountainous vineyard the founders planted over two decades ago in Lake County, a region that's still overlooked by many. The wines are also aged in Hungarian barrels instead of the customary French barrels.



Obsidian Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and sparkling Pinot Noir, will all be poured at the new tasting room. Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

And while others' wine prices have jumped significantly in recent years, Obsidian has kept its prices reasonable. Most bottles cost under \$50, and many of the brand's experimental offerings, like a sparkling Syrah with the playful name Chambrusso, are under \$30.

The winery did offer tastings at a basic space within the Cornerstone Sonoma marketplace for nine years, but its main engagement with consumers until now has been via unorthodox wine experiences involving seaplanes, sailboats and horses.

So while Base Camp (441 First St. West, Sonoma) might look like an unusually conventional move for Obsidian, Molnar is devoted to preserving the brand's rebellious nature, even within the confines of the traditional tasting room format. "Consumers seeking status, luxury and high price have never been our core troop of people," said Molnar, whose father came to Napa 50 years ago and planted his first vineyard. "I feel that system teetering a bit and we are a natural fit for that next generation that's deeply interested in how things are made and why they are made."

Though set about 50 feet from Sonoma Square, Base Camp feels far away from city life. The building's glass walls open to a lush zen garden filled with native plants and trees, which Obsidian general director Susan Sueiro called "our little private forest." Over time, the plants will grow and eventually cover the Japanese-inspired fencing around the perimeter. "The idea is you don't know when you're indoors or when you're outdoors," said Molnar. "A lot of the time, people come to a tasting room and they're separated from nature. We want to connect people to nature."



An outdoor fireplace at Base Camp made of obsidian rock that was collected from the winery's Lake County vineyard. Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

Named for the volcanic flow of obsidian rock its estate vineyard was planted on, Obsidian offers geologist-led vineyard hiking excursions in Lake County for \$225 per person. But since that's not accessible for most people, roughly a three-hour drive from San Francisco, Molnar hopes the tasting room will be the next best thing. To transport guests to their Obsidian Ridge vineyard, the team collected gravel and roughly 20 tons of obsidian — utilizing "a crane and some very strong men," noted Sueiro — from the site and then moved it to Base Camp. Chunks of the shiny black rock are scattered outside and a few larger pieces were used in custom furnishings, including an outdoor fireplace that guests can enjoy from fancy camping chairs.

Inside, video footage from the vineyard is projected on the back wall. Molnar called it "a portal to nature" because it gives the illusion that you can walk right into it. In one video, visitors can see a bear taking a stroll; another features an oak tree, which Molnar claims is about 700 years old and one of the oldest in North America. "We're trying to create the kind of vibe you get when you drive up to the vineyard with us," Sueiro said. "It connects on a different level and we're trying to replicate that here."

Other design elements are a nod to Obsidian's story. Obsidian owns a Hungarian cooperage, and some of the furniture is made from its oak. Above the bar, a blown-apart log, also sourced from the cooperage, will soon be turned into a light fixture. A large photo depicts a gold leaf, which carbonized during the 2015 wildfires and was discovered at Obsidian Ridge. "The idea is this dichotomy of brutality and the beauty of nature," said Molnar. "We don't run from talking about fires. We didn't make two vintages of wine because of them, but we have a commitment to explain to people that this is part of our natural ecosystem."

The gold leaf plays into Molnar's vision of "breaking down the fourth wall between the served and the server." The wine tasting experience has a reputation for often feeling stuffy or pretentious, so he wants Base Camp to be a casual, "anti-exclusive" environment that's transparent about how wine is made.

Visitors can choose from three tasting flights of four wines (\$30-\$50), including Down the Rabbit Hole, consisting of Obsidian's experimental wines, and another of all Cabernet Sauvignon. The tasting room will also host after-hours educational workshops on crafts like knapping, the Native American process of hammering rock, like obsidian, into a blade. Experts might also come to speak about topics like the Northern California ecosystem or aquaculture.

"Education is a huge part of what we do," said Molnar. "We want curious people that want to dig a little deeper. We want questions."

Obsidian Base Camp. Opens Thursday.
441 First St. West, Sonoma. obsidianwineco.com

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