

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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HOTELS

# Napa Valley's Poetry Inn

PERFECTING THE BED-AND-BREAKFAST  
IN CALIFORNIA'S WINE COUNTRY

Architecture by Howard J. Backen, FAIA/Interior Design by April Powers  
Text by Patricia Leigh Brown/Photography by Erhard Pfeiffer

When a peniless Robert Louis Stevenson honeymooned in Napa Valley, he slept in a run-down shack on Mount St. Helena. Despite his poverty, he was an early connoisseur of the vine, an astute observer of the Napa Valley *terroir*, a place, as he wrote in 1883, "where the soil has sublimated under sun and stars to something finer, and the wine is bottled poetry."

So there is a bit of poetic irony to be found in the Robert Louis Stevenson Suite at the Poetry Inn, a microclimate of luxury where slippers magically appear beside your bed, the pillow is preordered to your specifications, and killer views from your private terrace lull you into believing that the entire Napa Valley is yours and that you are the only one with the key. Named for Stevenson's now famous phrase, which appears on billboards along Highway 29 welcoming visitors to the valley, the Poetry Inn is perched regally on its own hillside high above Yountville, the down-home country hamlet where the local café is The French Laundry. The lord-of-the-manor exclusivity begins at the foot of a private drive, which is gated, the entrance code dispensed only to guests.

The inn calls itself a bed-and-breakfast, which is a little bit like considering Michelangelo's *David* a fine objet

"Our goal was to create a five-star bed-and-breakfast," architect Howard J. Backen says of the Poetry Inn, in California's Napa Valley, which he and his associate, designer April Powers, built for vintner Cliff Lede. The three-suite inn is nestled in the hills above Yountville.









Views are framed by Backen's signature pocket doors and windows, which can be completely opened to the landscape.



**LEFT:** "The Great Room has a homey, country casual feel. It doesn't feel like a lobby of a hotel," says Powers. William Glen Crooks's *Apotheosis* hangs at rear. The dining chairs are from Janus et Cie. Kravet leather on love seats. Rogers & Goffigon love seat cushion linen.

**ABOVE:** The terrace off the Great Room "is an ideal spot to have some wine and enjoy the magnificent view. You can see the valley and the Mayacamas Mountains beyond," the designer says. "The ceiling has fans and heaters. It's an all-season area for dining and lounging."

d'art. Breakfast is a three-course affair overlooking the valley floor.

The inn, which is limited to three suites, each with a private terrace and an outdoor shower deck, is the only public accommodation in the Stags Leap district, an appellation synonymous with acclaimed cabernet sauvignons. It is the latest property in the wine phalanx of the eponymous Cliff Lede Vineyards, the Canadian developer turned winemaker whose vineyard, known for limited-production cabs—including his flagship "Poetry" blend—forms much

of the idyllic rural setting the inn looks down upon.

If there is such a thing as an architectural *terroir*, the Poetry Inn may be it. Vineyards crisscross the hillsides. The views of the sun setting behind the Mayacamas range, the valley's sinuous spine, cry out for unwinding in your suite with a good bottle of wine, perhaps over a wood fire; the inn's private cellar has one of the finest selections of European wines in the valley.

The Stags Leap district bears the name of the rocky palisades that help give the appellation's wine a distinctive style. Its inn





“Each suite is unique,” Powers says. ABOVE: A four-poster dominates the bedroom in the Robert Louis Stevenson Suite. “We pulled the palette of gold and rust from the surrounding landscape,” she says. Schumacher floral pillow fabric.

is notable for its restraint and intimacy, the feeling of having arrived at a private home where the newspaper comes wrapped in a silk ribbon and a skilled massage therapist fetches you at the door to your suite, robe and slippers in hand. In place of a traditional lobby there is the Great Room, an oasis of monochromatic calm where books on wine await on the low table and mohair throws on leather-and-linen love seats are available for chilly nights.

The feeling of casual appropriateness, of coming home, was what Howard J. Backen wanted to achieve. Cliff Lede purchased what was then a popcorn-ceilinged, shag-carpeted B&B three years ago, first with

The design, inspired by the Napa vernacular, “is a blend of Craftsman and shingled-cottage styles,” says Backen. “We opened up the rooms so the inn would feel more like a home and added terraces to take advantage of the view and the warm climate.” ABOVE: The entrance.

the idea of transforming it into a residence. “I would drive by the inn, which had a For Sale sign for a long time,” Lede recalls. “There were very few sites for inns in the valley. I gradually became convinced it was like waterfront property and that we should build the most luxurious inn in Napa Valley there.”

The year before, the developer had purchased the S. Anderson winery on Yountville Cross Road, known for its sparkling wine. He and Backen, the court architect to a clutch of the valley’s most revered vintners, completely reimagined a 1913 Craftsman bungalow as a tasting room, with an outdoor garden and a gallery in the former fermentation room.

The style of a rarefied shingled cottage was the starting point for the Poetry Inn. “We took that shingle-roof cottage aesthetic up the hill, so there would be a cohesive set of buildings,” Backen explains.

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Powers, with the help of associates Jennifer Gowdy and Steve Elerding, gave the suite's sitting area "a romantic feel," she says. The low table was made from antique hemlock. Olive oil jars, photographs and a French bowl fill the niches. Rogers & Goffigon drapery fabric.