

CALIFORNIA  
STYLE &  
CULTURE

**Fashionable Living 2024**

*Hollywood*  
**DREAMS**

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**MICHELLE  
MONAGHAN'S**  
Inspired  
Hillside Home

A Thoroughly  
Modern Sonoma  
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Ally Hilfiger's  
Art-Filled Oasis in  
La Quinta



**PLUS** DIANE KEATON'S GOLDEN STATE GO-TOS AND AND NICOLE HOLLIS' HAUTE ABODES

## REMEMBERING

From *haute homes* to *WONDROUS WINERIES*, the architect's distinct style will live on in Napa and beyond

## HOWARD BACKEN

**W**ith his signature nature-centric style, award-winning architect Howard Backen (June 8, 1936–July 22, 2024) practically defined the aesthetic landscape of Napa Valley. Taking his cues from Mother Nature, Backen envisioned structures that have been referred to as “farmhouse chic” for his visionary use of reclaimed wood, stone, concrete, steel, and glass that, when combined, complemented their environments with discretion rather than standing in glaring contrast. From his three-decades-long design collaboration with Bill Harlan that produced the look and feel

of The Napa Valley Reserve, Meadowood, and the rest of Domain H. William Harlan to other wine country mainstays like Screaming Eagle, Continuum Estate (the new home for the Mondavi family’s second- and third-generation winemakers), and Knights Bridge Winery, Backen’s work is identifiable with the region and its world-class wines.

“Howard looked at all the existing architecture around the Napa Valley — which included French châteaux and Italian villas — and he realized it really needed to have a vernacular that set an ideal for architecture here,” says Harlan, the architect’s longtime friend. “When you look back on all the properties he designed, they were very site-specific and fit the land, and I really feel he made a huge impact on the valley that will continue to make a difference in a very positive way.”

By the time Backen and his former wife, interior designer Lori O’Kane, relocated to Napa in 1994, the architect had already enjoyed a successful 28-year career through his original firm, Backen, Arrigoni and Ross (later known as BAR Architects). While at BAR, he designed



**Clockwise from top:**  
The exterior of a movie-star couple’s residence;  
Backen at work;  
Padaro Beach House  
in Santa Barbara.



several high-profile film industry projects, including Robert Redford's Sundance Institute in Park City, Utah; George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch in Marin County; and Disney's Burbank Sound Studios. In 1996, following his move to Northern California's idyllic wine country, he founded Backen & Gillam Architects with James Gillam. "In his first 25 years up here, I worked with him twice a week for three hours a day — we always had something under construction or in design," Harlan says. "Jim [Gillam] was really good at rendering and Howard did all the design; you put the two of them together and it was beautiful."

To commemorate 22 years of its design emphasizing the simplicity and elegance of natural materials, Rizzoli published *From the Land: The Architecture of Backen, Gillam & Kroeger* in 2013. The hefty tome, written by Daniel P. Gregory with a foreword by friend and client Academy Award winner Diane Keaton, chronicles 38 of the firm's most compelling projects, including the home of vintner Tim Mondavi. "When we built the home — which began around 1980 — I actually worked with Howard's partner at BAR, Bob Arrigoni," Mondavi says. "Then many years later I wanted to renovate the home and pursued Howard because, during the original construction, it became evident that it was actually his [design] style I adored, and he [jokingly] said something like, 'I'd be delighted to help you fix my former colleague's mistakes.' He had a great sense of humor."

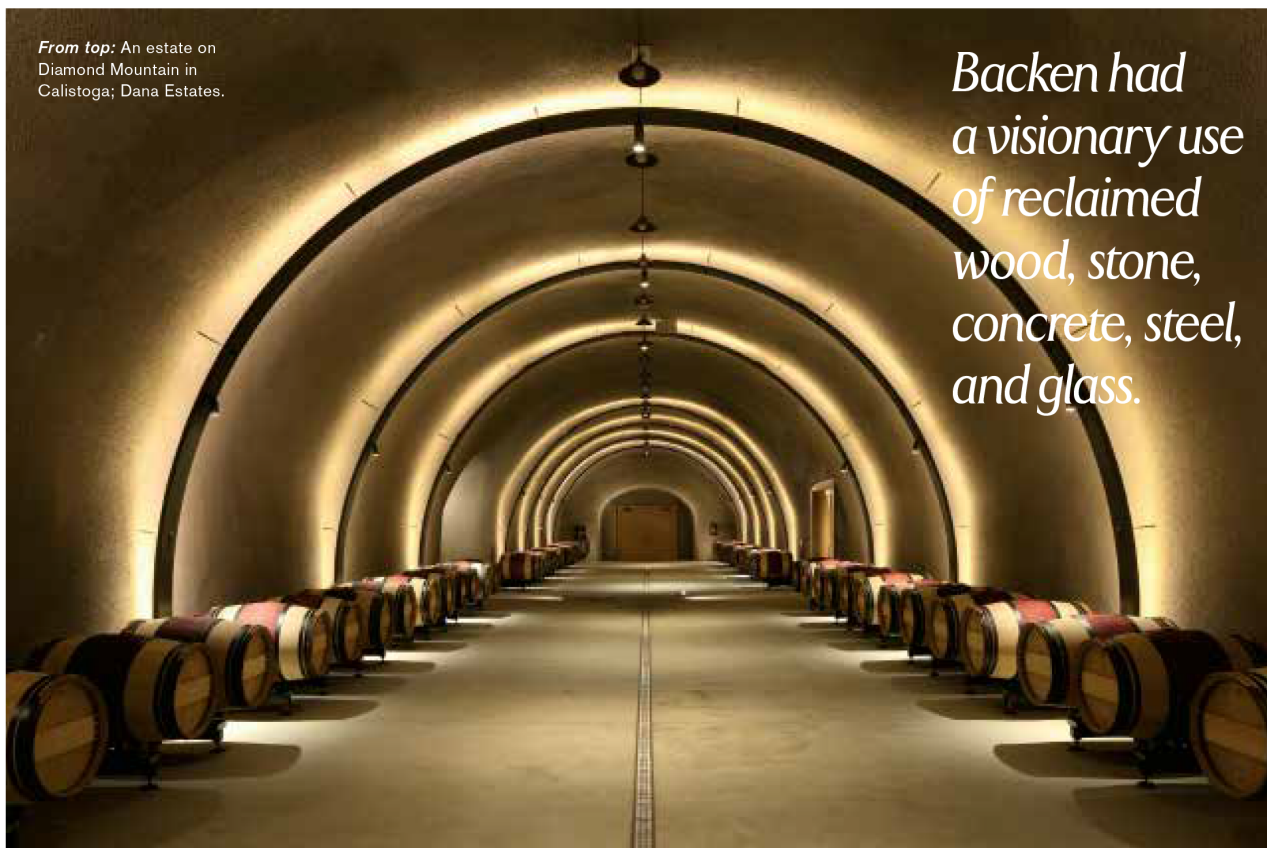
Following Gillam's departure from the firm, it was renamed Backen and Backen – Architecture | Lifestyle | Wellbeing in partnership with his wife, Ann Ernish-Backen. The couple maintained a practice centered around the ideas of regenerative design, environmentally conscious systems, and context-centered architecture. "Howard added to Napa Valley's beauty in ways that no one else has or perhaps ever will," says Ernish-Backen. "His works, which were built for and from the land, have become synonymous with the sublime character of the Napa Valley itself." Since its inception 28 years ago, the firm not only made its mark by designing upward of 60 wineries, but its more than 300 residential projects also included



monumental homes for Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis, Ellen DeGeneres, and Jeffrey Katzenberg, as well as a multitude of resorts, restaurants, and several lifestyle projects for RH. Serving as creative director and CEO, Ernish-Backen — alongside principals turned partners John Taft, Tony Selko, and Tom Spoja, and a broader team — will continue to execute Backen's inimitable vision long into the future. "When we purchased Knights Bridge vineyard in 2006, I envisioned building a winery and a home where we could entertain our friends, and a place where my sons and their young families would visit and stay," says winery owner Jim Bailey. "I am proud and grateful his legacy will forever be part of the Knights Bridge estate."

Having celebrated his 88th birthday a month and a half before his passing, Backen lived an aesthete's dream, surrounded by the natural beauty he endeavored to celebrate in his work through an oeuvre spanning more than 60 years. "Now that I have to finish a project I started with Howard, I didn't realize how much I would miss him if he went away," Harlan says. "Not only as a friend, but [as a design visionary], he could turn whatever ideas I had into something way more magical than I could conceive on my own." •

*From top:* An estate on Diamond Mountain in Calistoga; Dana Estates.



*Backen had a visionary use of reclaimed wood, stone, concrete, steel, and glass.*