Gehry Plans Another Architectural Surprise for Spain

EL CIEGO, Spain, July 9 — Frank O. Gehry drove into this medieval village, 50 minutes south of his acclaimed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, plotting another architectural surprise for Spain in his first winery project.

There was no international competition this time, like the one in which he was chosen last month to expand the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington. Mr. Gehry, now 70, said he simply wanted another job near the Guggenheim and was charmed by the hard-working owners of the 139-year-old Marqués de Riscal winery.

The $18 million deal was clinched over a bottle of rare red wine from Riscal's vintage of 1929, the architect's year of birth.

"They went into the cellars and brought out a bottle of 1929," Mr. Gehry said. "We drank it and it was even good. How could you turn them down?"

That was last July. On Mr. Gehry's second visit to the winery this month, he showed a preliminary scale model and sketches that depict a new rectangular building, which he admits will not be the final shape. As with the Corcoran project, he won over the winery with his concept for the job; the conclusive design can come later.

Riscal, a pioneer in Spain's premier red wine appellation, Rioja (which now has 400 wineries), wants to preserve its 19th-century sandstone buildings with red tile roofs and build Mr. Gehry's four-level structure in their midst.

It will include a visitor's center, public restaurant and private lodging. He will not design any wine-making facilities.

The winery, whose full name is Viños de los Herederos del Marqués de Riscal S.A., plans daily guided tours, common at many American wineries but practically unheard of in Spain. Riscal's owners also envision Gehry architectural tours, starting at the Guggenheim and then coming 80 miles south to view his design at the winery, due for completion by 2002.

The Guggenheim is a curving titanium-clad structure that Mr. Gehry, inspired by the old shipbuilding city of Bilbao, has likened to a ship. But he said the winery structure would not resemble a wine bottle, much less a corkscrew.

"Yes, it will address the culture of wine," Mr. Gehry said, "but you have to see what I did in Bilbao. I psyched out the culture and made a building that expressed that. It's more intuitive."

It will not go unnoticed in this village of 900 people, which is named after a blind innkeeper of long ago. ("Ciego" is "blind" in Spanish.)

"You will always, I guess, be able to recognize my work — there will always be a bit of surprise," Mr. Gehry said. "At first it looks strange, but people end up liking it. When they first saw the Guggenheim, there was a lot of anxiety."

Not anymore. The Guggenheim has had two million visitors opening in 1997, single-handedly revitalizing Bilbao's tourist trade. Many come principally to see the building, widely praised as one of the most important architectural works in this century, and Mr. Gehry has become quite fond of Bilbao.

"Our relationship with the Basque region has been like a family," he said. "It's so great to be there. Everyone hugs me. I've never been so adored in my life."

A Basque government official introduced Mr. Gehry to Riscal's top executives, who are mainly from the winery's five owner families.

"I have never gone out picking my work," he said. "I wait till it hits me on the head."

The architect has a second winery project in the works, which grew from an introduction by a cousin. Mr. Gehry is to design a $4 million winery for a Canadian and French joint venture to create a new winery in Ontario. It will be his first building in his native Canada, although he has designed interiors there. He left for Los Angeles half a century ago and became an American citizen.

A famous architect sells the concept but holds the details for later.

At Riscal, Mr. Gehry has not disclosed the building materials: "It don't think we'll use titanium," he said. "Plaster, stone, glass and wood are the likely candidates. The winery is after a miracle."

Riscal's winery production director, Francisco Hurtado, a descendant of the founder, agreed. "The winery is a series of buildings. To join all of them so visitors can come on a coherent circuit, we've asked for his help."

Mr. Hurtado, who participated in planning sessions with Mr. Gehry, predicted: "The new building won't have a straight line. All curves."

The winery is Mr. Gehry's third project in Spain. For the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, he designed a giant fish sculpture and commercial center at the base of a new skyscraper hotel on the city's Mediterranean beach.

Mr. Gehry's 33,000-square-foot winery plan will consist mainly of the visitor's center, but he will also design an entrance for a new wine-making plant nearby on the company's 37-acre headquarters.

Riscal is a mid-size winery that exports to 52 nations, the United States among them since 1963. Mr. Gehry does not consider himself a wine expert, but over a winery lunch of lamb chops, green salad and four red wines, including a 1942 and a 1945, he ribbed his hosts for not sending wine to his home in Santa Monica, Calif.

"I want one from every year," Mr. Gehry deadpanned.

Later Mr. Hurtado said the winery hoped that the globe-trotting architect would stay within budget but that it planned to exercise little other control.

"Gehry's No. 1," said Mr. Hurtado, standing in a Riscal aging cellar that holds four million bottles. "You can't tell him how to do it."

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