

INTERIORS

Distilling the Spirits of Nature

by Luo Jingmei

Photography by Chen Hao

19 Apr 2022

Neri&Hu designs The Chuan Malt Whisky Distillery in Sichuan, China for Pernod Ricard as a contemplative building rich with symbolism and sensuality.

In Emeishan, Sichuan in China, there is a particular building that presents itself as a series of visceral experiences entwined with nature – among them a sinewy path etched into the earth, a courtyard of rippling waterways, and a dome with a stepped base that is at once monumental and monastic.



THE ROOFS OF THE THREE WHISKY PRODUCTION FACILITIES USE RECLAIMED CLAY TILES AND THE INFILL OF ROCK WALLS IS MADE FROM THE VERY BOULDERS EXTRACTED FROM THE GROUND DURING SITE LEVELLING

This is no museum or art gallery, but The Chuan Malt Whisky Distillery by renowned whisky producer Pernod Ricard, designed by Shanghai-based multidisciplinary design studio Neri&Hu. It is the first international spirits and wines group to set up a fully operational malt whisky distillery in China, with an investment of 1 billion RMB over a decade. The development includes a production facility and visitor centre, the latter of which targets to draw two million tourists in the first decade as part of the company’s plan to contribute to the sustainable growth of the local economy and society.

The UNESCO World Heritage region has a grand view of the Emei mountain and is surrounded on three sides by a winding creek. This reinforces the Shan-sui (meaning “mountain-water”) Chinese notion of the duality of natural elements that make up our world – two opposing yet complementary forces of strength and permanence, and fluidity and transformation respectively that are manifested in the architecture.



WITHIN THE ROUND TASTING EXPERIENCE BUILDING IS A DRAMATIC CASCADING WATER FEATURE THAT CONTINUES THE EMPHASIS AND IMPORTANCE OF WATER THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT.



THE SQUARE BUILDING HOUSES A RESTAURANT AND BAR OVERLOOKING A COURTYARD OF WATER THAT IS DESIGNED AS AN ENGAGING FEATURE.

Emei’s pristine water source is crucial to the creation of the spirits. “Water is often considered a life source, but specifically in whisky culture, the term ‘eau-de-vie’ (or ‘water of life’) refers to certain spirits. Many distilleries are named for the regional waters or rivers that flow through them, and likewise, the river on our site is a critical component of the whole project ethos,” says Lyndon Neri, co-founder of the firm.

The element of water informs the physical journey across the site – from the entry, all the way through the building via meditative water features to the actual source of the river itself. From the whisky production building that is a simple, modern interpretation of the vernacular pitched-roof pavilion, the journey to the first experience centre is marked with a gentle ramp flanked by two rough stonewalls.



THE ROUND TASTING EXPERIENCE BUILDING IS PARTIALLY SUBMERGED IN THE GROUND, WITH THREE CONCENTRIC BRICK RINGS PERCHED ATOP TO MIMIC THE SILHOUETTE OF MOUNT EMEI.

“Your body senses that it is descending ‘into’ the earth itself. Progressing through an intentionally narrow and darkened path, almost deprived of your senses, you arrive suddenly into a tall, light-filled domed space. The sound and smell of water falling from the ‘sky’ into a copper pond reawakens your senses – reconnecting again with water and sky – to prepare you for the whisky tasting sessions,” describes Neri.

Visitors walk past this waterfall into five subterranean tasting rooms in the domed building to learn or try the art of blending whisky firsthand. There is a secret bottle display room of rare and exclusive bottles privy only to the most important of guests, accessed through a separate corridor.

“DISTILLING THE SPIRITS OF NATURE”
PORTFOLIO; APR 2022
<https://www.portfoliomags.com/article/distilling-the-spirits-of-nature.html>

PORTFOLIO



NERI&HU WANTED THE DOME TO NOT JUST BE A VISUAL ATTRACTION BUT ONE THAT GUESTS COULD EXPERIENCE INTIMATELY.

“DISTILLING THE SPIRITS OF NATURE”
PORTFOLIO; APR 2022
<https://www.portfoliomagsg.com/article/distilling-the-spirits-of-nature.html>

PORTFOLIO



THE TASTING ROOMS HAVE AN INTIMATE FEEL, FURNISHED BY FURNITURE DESIGNED BY NERI&HU.



THE TASTING ROOMS INCLUDE A MASTER BLENDER'S BLENDING TABLE WHERE ONE COULD LEARN OR TRY FIRST-HAND THE SKILL OF BLENDING WHISKIES.

Paying homage to the site’s history, the firm kept many of the terraces previously carved into the hilly slopes for farming and employed stepping levels to mitigate the topography. The idea was to touch the land lightly. The more built-up production facilities were tucked to the northern edge of the site, leaving the centre relatively empty save for the low-lying domed building. “While there were excavation and site levelling works, we were intent on saving all of the rocks from the ground and reusing them in the facades of the buildings, so that the cycle of destruction and creation comes full circle,” Neri highlights.

The understated yet symbolically rich architecture is a perfect manifestation of today’s perception of luxury. “If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that it is a luxury itself to be able to commune with nature, and be at peace with our environment,” says Neri. “As China’s mega cities continue to develop rapidly and dramatically, one of the things that people will desire more than ever is a return to the rural – the humility, simplicity and purity. This site and project can offer that.”