

Donald M. Hess Obituary

Donald Hess, the Swiss entrepreneur, vintner and art collector, died aged 86 in Bern, Switzerland, on 30 January, 2023.

Born in 1936, Mr. Hess did not have an easy childhood. While still a young boy, his elder brother passed away prematurely from leukemia, his mother left the home when he was eight, and his parents subsequently divorced. Raised by a relatively austere father in the shadow of the Second World War, early hardships engendered in Mr. Hess a robustness of spirit and self-sufficiency that supported him through a life of entrepreneurial endeavors around the world.

Mr. Hess's education was cut short at age 20 when his father passed away, and he took over his family's brewing and real estate business. Realizing the brewing industry was consolidating quickly and that prospects for smaller family breweries were waning, Mr. Hess made the difficult decision to sell the family's third-generation brewing business.

With the proceeds, Mr. Hess bought a mineral spring in Vals, a village in eastern Switzerland, and started to produce bottled mineral water under the brand *Valsler*. Over the next three decades, Mr. Hess built *Valsler* into the leading brand in Switzerland, eventually selling it to Coca Cola in 2002.

As *Valsler* grew, so did Mr. Hess' interest in contemporary art. With a keen eye for talent, Mr. Hess developed a world-renowned collection over the following four decades, focusing on younger artists with whom he could develop long-term relationships.

It was water, not wine, that brought Mr. Hess to the Napa Valley in the late 1970s, looking for a mineral water company through which he could expand into the US market. More persuaded by the quality of the region's wine, Mr. Hess started to look for vineyard acquisition opportunities and so started a love affair with wine that lasted the remainder of his life. He started The Hess Collection Winery in the early 1980s, building it over the next two decades into one of the most recognized Napa wine brands in the United States.

In the late 1990s, he traveled to Argentina and found what he called a "diamond in the rough." Bodega Colomé, a small 150-year-old winery that sat high in the Salta mountains, had everything that appealed to his pioneering and maverick spirit. He and his wife Ursula Hess moved to Argentina. Over the next decade, they rehabilitated the vineyards and built a state-of-the-art winery, accompanied by a building dedicated to works of art by James Turrell.

An entrepreneur and gifted brand-builder, Donald Hess had an infectious and unwavering zest for life and fearlessly followed his intuition. He passed away peacefully surrounded by his wife, Ursula, and family. Mr. Hess is survived by his wife Ursula, his daughter Alessandra, his stepdaughters Larissa and Sabrina, and five grandchildren.