

Sonoma Index-Tribune

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Buena Vista Winery officially unsheaths its Tool Museum



The Wine Tool Museum is a feast of the senses, indeed.

It's not many a Sonoma man who can claim to have been devoured by hungry alligators – and that's not what he's best remembered for.

But such is the case of Agoston Haraszthy or, rather, the self-proclaimed “Count” of Buena Vista Winery, the 158-year-old wine estate on Old Sonoma Road, whose well-documented rescue in 2011 by Jean-Charles Boisset from a two-decade dormancy resurrected not only one of California's greatest locations for wine, but also one of its greatest locations for wine legend.

And, indeed, wine showmanship. For, as bold as Buena Vista's 2012 Attila Zin is, Buena Vista's 2015 storytelling is even bolder.

From winery tours conducted by an actor in full-on “Count” persona (Sonoma favorite George Webber) to the undeniable influence of larger-than-life Jean-Charles Boisset himself, Buena Vista could very well be paving the way for a new paradigm in wineries: the tasting/history/virtual reality/off-off-off-Broadway theater experience.

The latest in BV's vintertainment offerings is the new Historical Wine Tool Museum, which pairs delicate pinot gris with a "light, sound and visual show" tracing the development of pomace cutters and vine pullers through the years.

But the 20-minute "tool experience" is much more than a historic overview of the phylloxera scourge of the 1870s. It's arguably – and this is no exaggeration – one of the two most enjoyable wine-tool exhibits the world has ever known.

The Buena Vista display is housed in its vast third-story exhibition hall, where a stately 30-foot-long banquet table (bring your friends!) sits in eloquence, surrounded by an array of tool sets – spread along the walls of the room in order of their chronological place in the wine-making process. Views of the tools are accented by colorful lighting schemes, mechanical moving parts and looping sound effects – think the Country Bears Jamboree, if Liver Lips McGrowl, et al, were replaced by a Hungarian winemaker and lots of pruning shears.

In each corner of the room, video feeds relate the story of Buena Vista Winery and the wine tools that made it great – a tale narrated by the Count himself (George Webber, again) in all the scenery-chewing glory one can inhabit when discussing the finer points of grafting pest-resistant rootstock.

It's as campy as all get out.

Which is partly the point, says Jean-Charles Boisset, who acknowledges the need to set a certain tone if one's going to expect folks to pay attention to an ag history lesson after diving into a carafe of 2012 Aristocrat "red blend."

"We want everyone to share in this (museum) experience," Boisset told the Index-Tribune on a recent tour of the exhibit. "And to feel they can enjoy our wines at the same time."

The tools curated for the museum are part of a collection that has long been housed in Boisset's native Burgundy region of France. (While the pieces on display in Sonoma are from Europe, Haraszthy, a Hungarian immigrant, would have used virtually identical tools at Buena Vista.) The majority of the relics are part of larger stash of 19th century tools collected by Philippe Berard, a wine historian, filmmaker and crony of Boisset.

In fact, the Buena Vista Wine Tool Museum is based on the even more ambitious L'Imaginarium, a sort of tasting-room/theme park hybrid in Burgundy, where Boisset and Berard concocted a similar 40-minute "light and sound" tour through wine-tool history, featuring a three-room display of more than a thousand tools.

“We scaled it down for the American audience,” Boisset said of the smaller show at Buena Vista, an acknowledgement that even Americans’ interest in vine billhooks has its limits.

If one comes away with anything from the Wine Tool Museum, it’s certainly a sense of the accomplishments of Agoston Haraszthy – who hopped off a wagon train in California in 1849, went on to serve in the state Assembly, and ran the San Francisco Mint. Through Buena Vista Winery, he is credited with excavating the first wine caves, creating the first gravity flow winery, and experimenting with California redwood for wine barrels. In 1863, he founded the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society, the first-ever incorporated wine group.

Sadly for the Count, he met his “unvinely” demise in the late 1860s, after relocating to Nicaragua where he harbored dreams of starting a sugar plantation and producing rum.

If nothing else, he was a man unafraid of wading into uncharted waters – literally. For, as Buena Vista officials put it, “he died crossing an alligator-infested stream in the jungle.”

Despite the Count’s indecorous end, his legacy will live on thanks to the folks at Buena Vista, who are themselves wading into uncharted winery waters with the Historical Wine Tool Museum.

May their rusty secateurs, pastel lighting schemes and lifelike animatronics do him proud.



Jean-Charles Boisset has quite a handle on the wine tool/tasting market.

Tickets for the museum are \$25 per person and include a tasting of four wines plus a guided tour. To celebrate the grand opening on May 31, Buena Vista is hosting a Historical Wine Tool Museum open house, where from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. visitors are invited to a free tour of the museum. Buena Vista Winery is at 18000 Old Winery Road in Sonoma. Call 800-926-1266.