

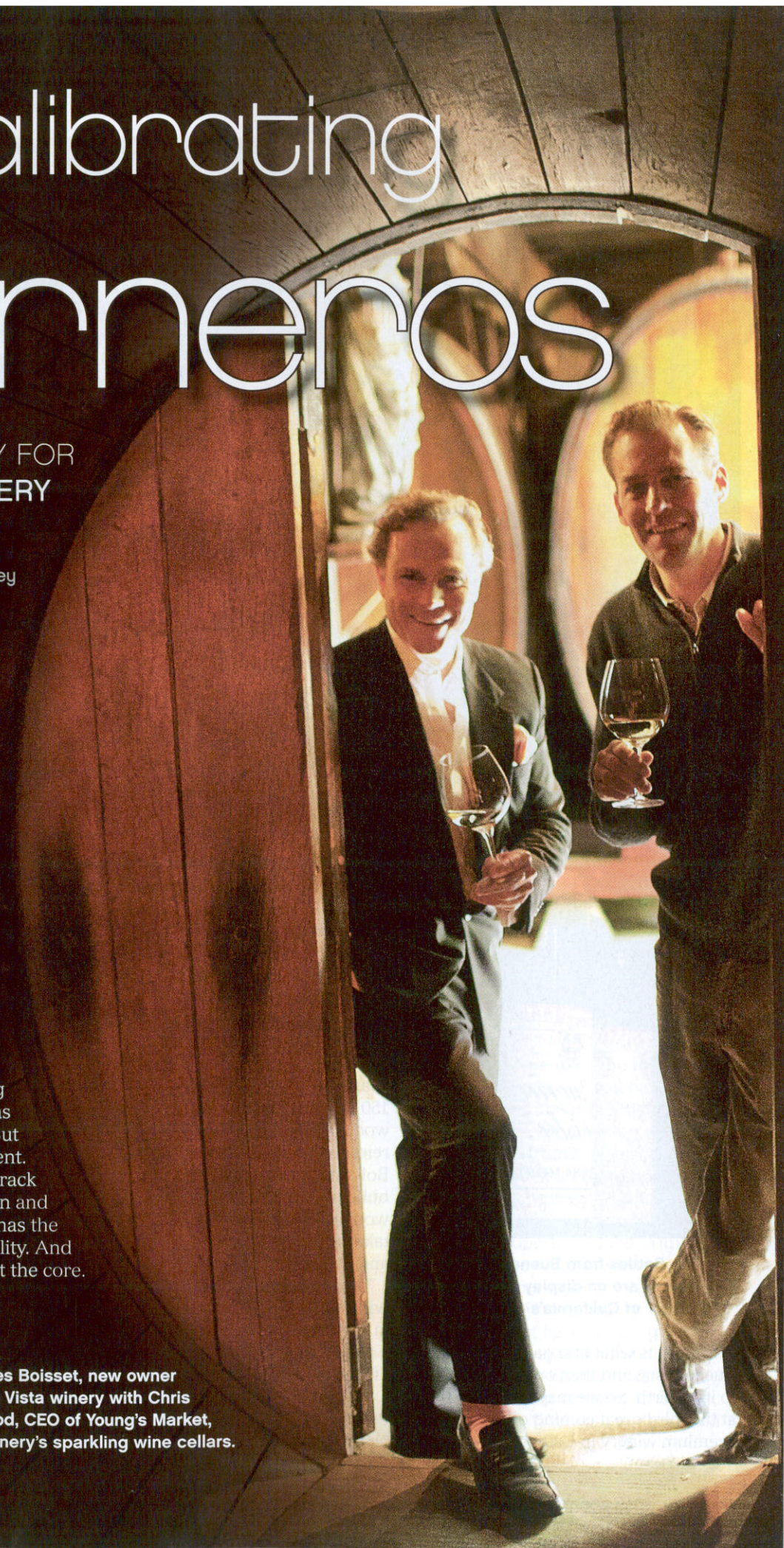
# Re-Calibrating in Carneros

IT'S A NEW DAY FOR  
BUENA VISTA WINERY

story and photos by John Curley

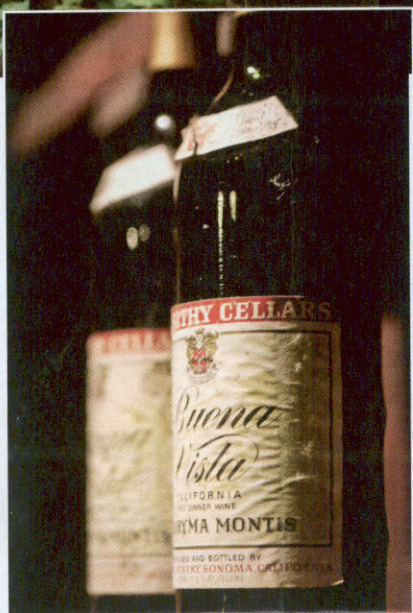
Don't talk about the wine "industry" with Jean-Charles Boisset, proprietor of Boisset Family Estates, the new owners of California's first winery, Buena Vista Winery. "Manufacturing is an industry," Boisset says. "Farming and winemaking are true arts and the most exciting mission in life." Boisset is at the winery this morning to meet with Chris Underwood, CEO of Young's Market Company, which will handle West Coast distribution for Buena Vista. Boisset took over Buena Vista only a little more than a month ago, but there is already a sense of energy and excitement in the air. In recent years, a changing of the guard at Buena Vista has felt like an annual occurrence. But this time, things will be different. Boisset Family Estates has a track record of quality, innovation and long-term commitment, and it has the wherewithal to turn vision to reality. And there is a great deal of heart at the core.

**Jean-Charles Boisset, new owner of Buena Vista winery with Chris Underwood, CEO of Young's Market, in the winery's sparkling wine cellars.**





Young's Market CEO Chris Underwood and his wife, Piper, meet with new Buena Vista owner Jean-Charles Boisset.



Bottles from Buena Vista's long history are on display in the cellars of California's oldest winery.

Passion is what first gave life to Buena Vista, and then once again led to its rebirth. So we may be looking at the third great coming of the oldest premium winery in California, just on

the outskirts of the quaint village of Sonoma, so steeped in history and so rich in inspiration.

"I've had my eye on her for a long time," Boisset says of the winery, as he walks around the top floor of the beautiful, but charmingly antiquated, sparkling wine cellars. The building is 150 years old, constructed of stone and wood, and while it no doubt will need reinforcement, there is no mistaking Boisset's intention when he says, "A building like this is like a beautiful woman—she needs to be loved and take care of; she needs to be kissed and adored."

There are many reminders of the winery's glorious past gathering dust in the cellar tunnels. At the far end of a row of giant wine barrels, there is a life-sized picture of Agoston Haraszthy, a Hungarian immigrant variously described as a count, a colonel and an international man of mystery, who

founded Buena Vista in 1857. Haraszthy began his winemaking career in Wisconsin. Not surprisingly, things didn't go well in that harsh climate.

Haraszthy eventually made his way to California, first to San Diego, and then to Sonoma. He declared that "the vine flourishes better [here] than the most favored regions of Europe." Haraszthy subsequently planted the finest root stock from Europe and willingly shared his vines with other vintners in the area, virtually launching the wine trade in California and earning recognition as the "Father of California Viticulture."

His focus on growing varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, which would grow well in the Sonoma region, helped spur the creation of Sonoma as a leading center for wine cultivation. He created the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society to expand the winery's vineyard holdings and

plant more of the premium vines he'd brought from Europe. Boisset intends to restore the Vinicultural Society name at Buena Vista to celebrate the winery's heritage in Cabernet, Zinfandel and other premium varietals from Sonoma.

But the story did not move smoothly forward. An outbreak of phylloxera in 1867 wiped out Buena Vista's vines and Haraszthy sold the property. He traveling to Nicaragua to pursue an interest in rum production, where he met an untimely death in a jungle river—alligators were reportedly at fault.

That's where the second great protagonist in Buena Vista's story arrived. Frank Bartholomew was a war correspondent (and eventual President of the United Press International) with a taste for the finer things in life. He was overseas covering World War II when

he saw the ad for Buena Vista and decided to purchase the property sight-unseen. For 20 years, Frank and his wife, Antonia, lovingly and successfully pushed the enterprise forward, enduring the ups and downs of vineyard life. They finally decided to sell Buena Vista in 1968 but retained land nearby where they retired.

Who did Bartholomew sell to? None other than the Underwood family—specifically, Chris's grandfather, who at the time was at the helm of Young's Market. Under his watch, the winery significantly expanded its vineyard holdings and built a family tradition as leading Sonoma winemakers with distribution throughout California and the U.S.

Now, more than 40 years later, Chris Underwood is back at Buena Vista, talking with Boisset as the new owner enthusiastically shares his vision of the future. "It's phenomenal to see Buena Vista again as a family winery and to have it be distributed by the Young's Market family," Underwood says. "We eagerly look forward to rebuilding its tradition and distribution in California."

With a long history as a pioneer of Sonoma viticulture, Buena Vista is a specialist in the Carneros viticultural region, which is characterized by its shallow, dense soil, cool summers and mild winters. The climate conditions in Los Carneros brought a concentration on wines that do well there—most outstanding are Burgundian varietals Chardonnay and Pinot Noir—but it



also sees some lovely Syrah and Merlot.

When asked about his plans for Buena Vista Boisset gets visibly excited. "The terroir is what is making all this possible," Boisset says. His emphasis will be making wines that excel in Sonoma and the well-respected Carneros vineyards that Buena Vista is known for. "Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel were first grown here in Sonoma by Haraszthy," Boisset notes, "We want to reignite that tradition and are excited to unveil the dynamic new Vinicultural Society tier." It's likely that other varieties will be explored, too. Sparkling wine seems like a natural; Buena Vista was producing sparkling wine as early as 1860, and there is tremendous nostalgia for the cream sherry that once was a very popular Buena Vista product.

But more than that, Boisset would like to see the winery spring back to life. A sense of history hangs heavy in the air at Buena Vista, but perhaps too heavily. "We want to be smelling wine, not dust," Boisset says. "We want to make people who love wine say, 'This is the place you have to visit and learn about the history of California and winemaking in the United States from the very beginning!'" And to that effect, Boisset plans to explore ways to bring new life and new visitor experiences to the historical property and the original first wine caves of California.

Boisset seems eager to become a steward of California history, but it's clear he will not be a somber guardian. He envisions lively events and grand celebrations, not just picnickers sitting at the old wooden benches on the winery's drive. "We want to dance and dream again," he says. ■■



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