

A New Chapter in California Wine History

JEAN-CHARLES BOISSET LOOKS TO THE PAST TO ENVISION THE FUTURE AT **BUENA VISTA**

by Deborah Parker Wong / photos by Rebecca Wilkowski



New packaging was inspired by the winery's circa-1860 labels and evokes Buena Vista's Sonoma heritage.

On the whole, consumers know little about the history of wine in California prior to 1976—when the industry achieved fame at the infamous Judgment of Paris tasting—and the same could be said for much of the trade as well. As the number of Napa and Sonoma wineries celebrating milestone anniversaries grows, history will play an increasingly important role in conveying the authenticity and provenance of California's wines.

"The rich history of California's wine world has been collecting dust," observes Jean-Charles Boisset, whose family-owned company, Boisset Family Estates, added the iconic 155-year-old Buena Vista winery to its holdings in May of 2011. "Buena Vista's future lies in its past; we're restoring a legend and creating a unique visitor experience that will make Sonoma a 'must-visit' destination for wine enthusiasts the world over."

The company owns, at last count, 24 winery properties worldwide, and Boisset sees domestic and global wine culture from a perspective that few possess. "California has condensed 1,500 years of wine growing history into 150 years. It's phenomenal to see and celebrate the American spirit, which so quickly learns, absorbs and improves upon traditions that developed all over the world."

In December, Buena Vista revived its Sonoma history by introducing a new series of Sonoma wines crafted under the guidance of consulting winemaker David Ramey and debuted a complete label redesign across the winery's portfolio. The Sonoma series includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and "The Count," a red field blend that pays homage to the winery's founding father, Count Agoston Haraszthy. The winery will add a Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay from Sonoma in spring 2012. The 2011 vintage marks the return of winemaking to Buena Vista, where no wine has been made on-site for more than 20 years.



New owner Jean-Charles Boisset (seated) inside the cellar at historic Sonoma winery Buena Vista. Founder Count Agoston Haraszthy, played by character actor George Webber, looks on with obvious approval.



Owner Jean-Charles Boisset, shown outside the Buena Vista cellar, is a worthy successor to Count Haraszthy. In the background, the Count, played by actor George Webber, gives visitors a tour.

Boisset and label artist Jeffrey Caldewey were inspired by Buena Vista's circa-1860 labels and achieved a soft, aged patina through the use of techniques such as foil stamping and sculpted embossing. The labels evoke Buena Vista's heritage and convey the quality inherent in this new generation of wines. In addition to the winery's well-known Carneros wines, Boisset has resurrected the Private Reserve wines and introduced the Vinicultural Society, a series of small-production wines that will be available only at the winery and to club members that include clonal selections, offerings of esoteric varietals, and a specialty tier that includes a sparkling wine, and soon, cream sherry, tawny and other selections evocative of the wines famous at the winery's founding

A State of Nobility

Like many of the state's oldest wineries, Buena Vista's early history is built around the ambitious foresight of its founder—one Count Agoston Haraszthy de Mokesa—and, with

Boisset's vision fueling the effort, it's only a matter of time before Haraszthy's name finds a place in the consciousness of wine-loving consumers.

Haraszthy was among a handful of Europeans, including Frenchman Jean-Louis Vignes and Russian André Tchelistcheff (who was a partner in reviving Buena Vista with Frank Bartholomew in 1949), who left an indelible mark on the California wine industry. In 2007, he was inducted into the Culinary Institute of America's Vintner's Hall of Fame, but until then, his legacy had gone largely unsung.

"It's my intention for Buena Vista to become a mecca for people the world over who want to learn about the history of wine in California," says Boisset. If someone has two hours to spend visiting wine country, our historical tours and interactive visitor experience will be one-stop shopping for them."

In addition to historical tours with The Count, as portrayed by character actor George Webber, who spent ten years perfecting his role as Count Agoston Haraszthy (his many per-

The Legacy of Count Haraszthy

Haraszthy, a Hungarian noble, emigrated to the U.S. in 1840 and spent time in Wisconsin and San Diego before making his way north to San Francisco. It was not until 1856, when he discovered an old, dry-farmed vineyard on a site known as Buena Vista Ranch in Sonoma, that he bought 800 acres and build an elaborate home and the stone winery that is Buena Vista.

In his determination to emulate the culture of fine wine that had been part of his family's history for centuries, Haraszthy was an inspiration to many, including his friend Charles Krug, who went on to pioneer winegrowing in Napa Valley.

Intent on advancing viticulture in California, he traveled the winegrowing regions of Europe and returned home in 1862 with a collection of vines and ideas that he documented in a book titled *Grape Culture: Wines and Wine-making, with Notes upon Agriculture and Horticulture*, published by Harper in 1862.

A few short years later, Haraszthy was forced out of the corporation he formed with investors and left California to explore rum production in Nicaragua. His death there in 1869 brought to a close the single most influential chapter in the history of California's first premium winery until the repeal of Prohibition, more than 60 years later.

Proprietary red blend "The Count," a tribute to Buena Vista's colorful founder, Count Agoston Haraszthy, sets the tone for new owner Jean-Charles Boisset's celebration of the Sonoma winery's history—and its future.



Wine,
after all,
is at the
center
of our
civilization.”

— Jean-Charles Boisset

sonas also include General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, whose history was inexorably linked with Haraszthy's when their children married), the winery will play host to Shakespearian theater and performing-art events as part of a one-of-a-kind consumer education program.

“We're also envisioning a more in-depth educational program designed specifically for the industry that will incorporate demonstrations of Sonoma's terroir, a museum of historical winemaking tools, a culinary center, and much more,” continues Boisset. With plans already underway for seismic retrofitting of the original stone winery building, an overhaul of the cellar, replanting of estate vineyards and restoration of the riparian habitat, the property is well on its way to being returned to a state of nobility.

It may be a serendipitous, passionate vision that drives Boisset's acquisitions in California, but he sees Buena Vista as “a window into the history of California wine” and believes that Sonoma's history will play a valuable role in educating future generations of wine consumers.

Not unlike Haraszthy and the ex-patriot Europeans who defined the industry's earliest years, Boisset is writing a new chapter in the annals of California's wine history.



Deborah Parker Wong's Tasting Notes on Buena Vista's Sonoma Series

“The Count” 2008 (\$20) Distinctive field blend with aromas of dark red fruits and graphite followed by deeper flavors of black cherry, vanilla, pencil shavings supported by creamy, mid-palate tannins. Bright, sweet fruit marks a soft finish.

Cabernet Sauvignon 2010 (\$16) Perfumed red fruit and cedar aromas deepen to classic Sonoma red-fruit flavors that are concentrated on a medium-weight mid palate with complex star anise and brown spice on a crisp, extended finish. 100% Cabernet Sauvignon.

ZinFandel 2010 (\$16) Ripe blackberry and cranberry aromas with dark berry flavors and well-integrated oak tannins giving structure to a medium-bodied mid palate. Leaner fruit and toast carry the finish. 100% Zinandel. ■■