

Buena Vista celebrates 200 years

In 2009 a royal wedding occurred in America, uniting American wine heiress Gina Gallo, great grand-



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Uncorked

daughter of Julio Gallo and principal in America's largest wine company, and her handsome prince, Jean-Charles Boisset, head of the American arm of Boisset Family Estates, France's third-largest wine company. My invitation must

have gotten lost in the mail.

Jean-Charles comes from an acquisitive family. In addition to holdings in France, the family's American holdings include DeLoach Vineyards, Lyeth Estate, Raymond Vineyards and, since 2011, historic Buena Vista Carneros Winery.

Buena Vista, California's oldest premium wine producing facility, fell into disrepair through a series of previous owners. Boisset is revamping original buildings and shoring up wine caves dug by Chinese laborers in the mid-1800s, along with revamping the brand.

Buena Vista is celebrating the 200th birthday of its founder, Count or Col. Agoston Haraszthy, also known as the Father of the California Wine Industry.

In truth, he was neither count

nor colonel. Haraszthy was born in 1812 to a noble Hungarian family. He was such a skilled self-promoter that historians have difficulty separating biographical fact from fiction. Thomas Pinney, in his book "A History of American Wine," acknowledges many unresolved historical discrepancies surrounding Haraszthy.

Haraszthy came to America in 1840 allegedly fleeing political persecution for being on the wrong side of the Hungarian Independence movement. Pinney refutes Haraszthy left Hungary under duress because he later returned to Hungary, sold all his holdings and moved his family, including his mother and father, to America without government interference.

Haraszthy settled in Wisconsin engaging in farming, retail trade and manufacturing. He planted hops and operated a ferry and steamboat on the Wisconsin River. The flamboyance with which he pursued these endeavors caused him to be dubbed the Count by fellow settlers.

Haraszthy planted wine grapes, built a winery and dug cellars for storage apparently giving little consideration to Wisconsin climatic conditions that froze his grapes before harvest. He left Wisconsin for San Diego where he also planted vines.

He became San Diego County's first sheriff. He was elected to the state assembly in 1851 and promptly abandoned San Diego, purchasing land south of San Francisco, where he developed a plant and vine nursery.

He became a gold assayer and refiner in San Francisco, becoming the official smelter and refiner for the San Francisco Mint, all the

while operating a private refining business for his own self-interest.

Accused of embezzling \$150,000, he was forced to sell his holdings to provide collateral for the missing money until he was tried.

Undeterred, he bought 560 acres in Sonoma and planted vineyards with his embezzlement trial hanging over his head. He was later exonerated and had his money restored.

He built a large Italianate Villa on his Sonoma property, sold plants from his nursery, and made large amounts of wine at the estate he called Buena Vista. He imported and sold European vines and planted vineyards for the likes of Charles Krug and Gundlach and Bundschu.

Haraszthy, ever the schemer, formed the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society and sold shares to investors. Haraszthy was accused of mismanagement and ultimately lost his proverbial shirt.

Once again undeterred, he managed to buy a sugar plantation in Nicaragua and secured a permit to produce rum. Then Haraszthy disappeared. Legend holds he was eaten by an alligator.

In honor of the Count's 200th birthday and Buena Vista's transformation under the Boisset family, Count Agoston has reappeared this time as an impersonator who entertains Buena Vista visitors.

The Count's assertion that he owned the largest wine producing operation in the world was likely fiction, but the massive vineyard holdings of the Boisset and Gallo families are not. These two families account for a substantial portion of world wine production.

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