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A conversation with Count Agoston Haraszthy

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George Webber as Count Agoston Haraszthy, standing in the ancient cellars of Buena Vista Winery. Photo: Jeff Kan Lee/PD.

By **SUZIE RODRIGUEZ** / Sonoma Valley Correspondent

Next week Sonoma will celebrate the 200th birthday of "Count" Agoston Haraszthy, founder of Buena Vista Winery and the universally-acknowledged "Father of California Viticulture."

This bicentennial event is so historically important that the mayor and other representatives of Haraszthy's Hungarian hometown—Tokaj, one of Sonoma's Sister Cities—are traveling here for the celebrations.

According to Bill Boerum, President of the [Sonoma Sister City Association](#), the upcoming Haraszthy excitement "considerably adds to Sonoma's allure, recognition and image of being a

WRITER SPOTLIGHT



Suzie Rodriguez is our Sonoma correspondent.
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world-class wine producing area and city with global connections.”

All of which makes this the perfect time for a chat with Haraszthy...or at least his 21st-century embodiment, actor George Webber.

In his job as Buena Vista's official ambassador, Webber travels around the country dressed in 19th century garb as Agoston Haraszthy. His primary task is to relate the story of Haraszthy's amazing life to distributor sales teams, but he also visits top wine shops and restaurants.

With his imposing stature and bass voice, Webber's a real crowd pleaser. He's also a bit of a ham—actually more of a giant hamhock—and the kind of intelligent actor who undertakes extensive archival research on his characters. One day a week ago, he was happy to educate a visitor on some lesser-known Haraszthy lore.



Count Agoston Haraszthy, circa 1860s. Photo courtesy of Buena Vista Winery.

Can you tell readers more about Haraszthy's Hungarian hometown of Tokaj?

It's an ancient town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2002. It's the central town in the world's first classified wine region, Tokaj-Hegyalja. If you go back 500 years in history, there were only two famous wine regions: Burgundy and Tokaj—Bordeaux didn't even exist as far as wine goes. Haraszthy's father made wine and was in the wine business, so Agoston learned how to make wine from the time he was five years old.

Here's a strange coincidence: Jean-Charles Boisset, who owns Buena Vista today, not only grew up in the other famous ancient wine region, Burgundy, but also started making wine at the age of five.

Haraszthy wasn't really a Count, right?

True. Hungarian is a difficult language, and the family's precise rank is impossible to pronounce in English, so Agoston began using the word "Count" upon arrival in Wisconsin.

He is descended from one of the most famous families in Hungary, who won renown and land for their valor in fighting the Turks. They were a noble family and can trace their lineage back over 600 years, and thus were allowed to attend the "Diet" or Parliament. His family owned thousands of acres of land, producing alfalfa, corn, wheat, pigs, cattle, and grapes. He married his wife, Eleonora, who could speak at least seven languages, and started a family. Life was good.

So why leave Hungary for America?

Agoston was an ambitious, brilliant man who wanted to be hugely successful, but in Hungary all businesses were owned by two or three blood-sucking monopolies. It was too hard to be an entrepreneur there, but everyone said that America was a land of opportunity and freedom. So in 1840 he went to see for himself, leaving his wife and their first two kids in Hungary; she was pregnant with their third child, Arpad.

Agoston purchased land on the Wisconsin River and laid out the town now known as Sauk City, and got involved in a lot of enterprises—he planted grapes, had a brickyard. He obviously liked it, since he returned to Hungary in 1842 to bring back his family. When gold was discovered in California, the family, with 5-month-old Ida, left Wisconsin and headed west along the Santa Fe Trail with an 80-wagon train; he was elected captain. They arrived in San Diego nine months later and had all kinds of adventures along the way.

Let's skip past the amazing number of businesses, honors and perhaps financial irregularities during his years in San Diego and San Francisco—enough to fill 4 or 5 lifetimes for the average person—and get to Sonoma. How did he end up here?

While representing San Diego in the state legislature in 1852, he met General Vallejo, who invited him to visit in Sonoma. He got here, took one look, and said “This is it! The perfect vine-land on earth.”

The native stone winery he built in 1857 in Sonoma still stands. It’s out on Old Winery Road, and it’s just been thoroughly renovated but has kept the historical integrity. It was the first gravity-flow winery in California. He was the first to use redwood barrels for aging, something that became the norm. He was the first to do a lot of things in California’s wine industry.

What did Haraszthy’s Tokaj wine upbringing give to his Buena Vista venture?

He built Buena Vista with the same kind of cellar they had in Tokaj, using Chinese laborers to excavate caves for aging and storing wines. He also made a special Tokaj-style wine that he called Tokay—probably so people could pronounce it. And because he had worked with his father, he not only knew how to make wine, he also knew the business of wine.

Before the mid-19th century, California wines were made from the inferior “Mission” grapes brought from Mexico by Franciscan missionaries—by all accounts, wine made from these grapes wasn’t very good. Haraszthy is often credited with being the first to bring in European vine stock, *vitis vinifera*, which today accounts for the majority of world wine production.

General Vallejo was already making pretty good wine, some of it from *vinifera*. Arpad later said that his father was the first to bring Zinfandel to California, but it’s impossible to prove now. There were nurseries in California, people had been bringing European cuttings here since the late 1840’s. It was here, but not in quantity. What Haraszthy did that was important was to bring in huge quantities of *vitis vinifera* and propagate them: 100,000 cuttings of 353 different varieties.

And he was the first person to bring modern European viticultural techniques to California. That’s why he’s so famous, and why Hungarians are so proud of him, and why his 200th birthday is such a big deal.

Haraszthy eventually left Sonoma for Nicaragua, and died there.

Tragedy overtook the Count’s life in the mid-1860’s when the vine-louse *Phylloxera* destroyed Buena Vista’s vineyards. He went to Nicaragua in 1868 to make rum and rebuild his fortune. On July 6, 1869 he was crossing a crocodile-infested river on a tree used as a natural bridge. He slipped and fell into the river, and was consumed by a crocodile.

The Buena Vista Viticultural Society, started by Haraszthy, was successor to the winery. They struggled until 1878, when *Phylloxera* had completely destroyed the vines, and then declared bankruptcy.

Aside from the events in Sonoma on August 30, what other ways has Haraszthy’s birthday been recognized this year?

On May 29, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors presented the Count with a Commendation Proclamation. In Sonoma’s 4th of July Parade, one of the Count’s descendants, Val Haraszthy—who lives here and is also a winemaker—served as Grand Marshal, and local groups created floats celebrating the Count’s contributions to the town. And in October he will be this year’s **Sonoma Valley Muse**, with a live auction and sit-down dinner at Buena Vista Winery.

Learn more about Count Agoston Haraszthy and Buena Vista Winery at buonavistawinery.com.

Here’s how to celebrate Haraszthy’s 200th birthday in Sonoma:

Friday (8/31), 11 a.m.: Attend the opening of an exhibition presenting works of art, created by children in Tokaj and Sonoma, that look at Agoston Haraszthy’s life. A reception follows the opening ceremony. Free admission. The exhibit will run through September 30. Sonoma Community Center, 276 E. Napa Street, Sonoma.

Saturday (9/1), 11 a.m.-2 p.m.: The Sonoma-Tokaj Sister City Committee and Buena Vista Winery will host the official 200th Birthday Celebration of Count Agoston Haraszthy will be celebrated at Grinstead Amphitheatre in Sonoma Plaza. This free event is open to the public and features music honoring Hungarian culture, speeches, a bilingual (English/Hungarian) performance of the “Count of Buena Vista Play,” and the signing of the Official Sonoma-Tokaj Sister City documents.

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