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cuddle in home
video
1 of 9



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specifics
2 of 9



WORLD
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in 3 countries
3 of 9

September 9, 2012 2:36 PM

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Winery to resume wine-making in old buildings

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In this photo taken Friday, Aug. 31, 2012 people attend a celebration of the re-birth of Buena Vista Winery's historic champagne cellars and caves at the winery in Sonoma, Calif. Many people think the California wine world came of age in 1976 after a famous tasting in Paris put the Golden State's vintages on the world map. But for Jean Charles Boisset, new owner of the state's oldest commercial winery, the state's fine wine making traditions started a century before that. That's why the Burgundian is building the future of 155-year-old Buena Vista Winery, a landmark known as the birthplace of California wine, on its past. He plans to make wines in September in the stately stone buildings and old wine caves for the first time in two decades. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg) (Eric Risberg)

SONOMA, Calif. — Jean-Charles Boisset, new owner of California's oldest premium winery, is building the future of 155-year-old Buena Vista Winery on its rich and eclectic heritage.

This month, the native of France's Burgundy region plans to make wines inside in the stately stone buildings and old wine caves for the first time in two decades. In preparation, barrels recently were rolled into place inside a dimly lighted cavern, a new oak fermenter was uncovered and cement was poured onto the floor.

Outside, activity swirled with the laying of cobblestones and touch-up of building walls.

Buena Vista, now a state historical landmark, was founded in 1857 by Hungarian-born Count Agoston Haraszthy, who procured the 800 acres for his winery outside Sonoma with dreams of producing premium wine. He began to call himself the "Count of Buena Vista." During his wide-ranging career, he also served as a sheriff, marshal, California State assemblyman and chief of the San Francisco Mint.

Among his contributions to California winemaking were the first gravity-flow winery, the first excavated wine caves and the use of redwood barrels for aging and fermentation.

In 1861, he traveled to Europe to gather the cuttings representing over 300 varietals, and many were planted throughout the Buena Vista vineyards. He later created a viticultural society and wrote an acclaimed book on horticulture and winemaking. The count died in an accident in 1869 during a trip to Nicaragua, where he was searching for a new transportation route and exploring sugar growing and rum production.

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Although the winery won a number of international awards in 1873, financial pressures forced it to cease production in the late 1800s. Buena Vista was purchased in 1943 by Frank and Antonia Bartholemew, who brought in America's most influential post-Prohibition winemaker, Andre Tchelistcheff, as a consultant, who helped produce a very successful vintage in 1949. But in 1968, the winery was sold, and over the next several decades it changed hands many times.

In May 2011, Buena Vista was purchased by Boisset Family Estates, led in the U.S. by Jean-Charles Boisset. For Boisset, as for the Count, Buena Vista is a dream come true.

He first saw the winery at age 11 during a trip to the U.S. with his grandparents.

"It was love for me at first sight. Not only for the wines, but as well for the buildings, for the style of the buildings and the energy of the place," he said. "I never fathomed that such historical buildings were in place in California. I fell in love with it."

To Boisset, Buena Vista represents the quintessential history of California winemaking.

"A lot of people think that the California wine world was born in 1976 after the Judgment of Paris tasting, but no, it started way before," he said. "The wines are great, but we can explain to people what a great region it is through its long-lost heritage."

In addition to Buena Vista's renovated buildings and grounds, there is a "demonstration area" featuring many clones and varieties the Count brought from Europe. Visitors can taste interesting and unusual wines such as Pinot gris, Grüner Veltliner, French Colombard and muscat, among others. And they can get a firsthand view of Buena Vista's winemaking, taking place for the first time in more than 20 years. Just a few thousand cases of wine are planned — mostly reds such as Zinfandel and Pinot Noir. Winery renovations are expected to be mostly finished in September with the first grapes being pressed.

"I envision Buena Vista to have a very strong future. The future is its past," said Boisset.

Others also welcome the renovation.

Fred Unsworth, a 35-year native of Sonoma, has worked in maintenance at the winery since 2000 for no fewer than six different owners.

"When I first saw the winery it was rather old and being kept together by chewing gum to some degree in areas," Unsworth said. "People in Sonoma are excited. To those that have been here a long time this is a revelation, something that should have happened years ago and didn't."

Nowadays a frequent sight most afternoons at the winery is actor and historian George Webber portraying "Count Haraszthy" in full costume, welcoming visitors and retelling stories of his feats and vision.

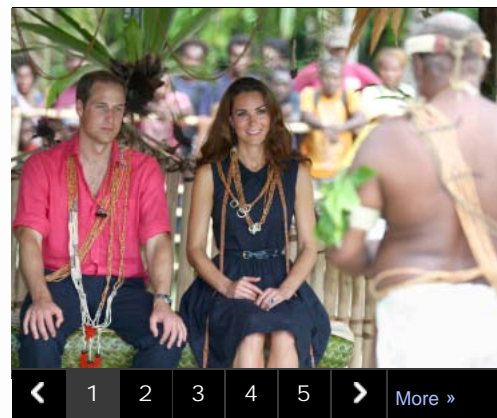
"He is still alive here," Boisset said. "We are basically continuing his dream. I feel that there is a little of the Count within me and within all of us at Buena Vista because he had a dream ..."

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