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Winery reborn



Buena Vista Winery production manager Greg Gallagher punches down pinot noir grapes from the Sangiacomo Vineyard in the cellar at the Sonoma winery. This is the first time in 40 years they have produced wine at the facility.

Crista Jeremiason / PD

By VIRGINIE BOONE FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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The first California winery Jean-Charles Boisset ever visited was Buena Vista, at age 11, on a trip with his parents and grandparents in 1980. It was this tie to history, and the taste of the wine (which his grandparents allowed him to sample, sequestered safely back at their hotel) that so sparked the boy in Boisset all those years ago.

The Boisset family's vineyards in France go back some 17 centuries. Buena Vista Winery goes back to 1857, founded by self-proclaimed "Count" Agoston Haraszthy, who is credited with bringing European vitis vinifera to California, the vine species responsible for most of the world's wines.

Vinifera replaced the mission grapes brought from Mexico and the

Facts

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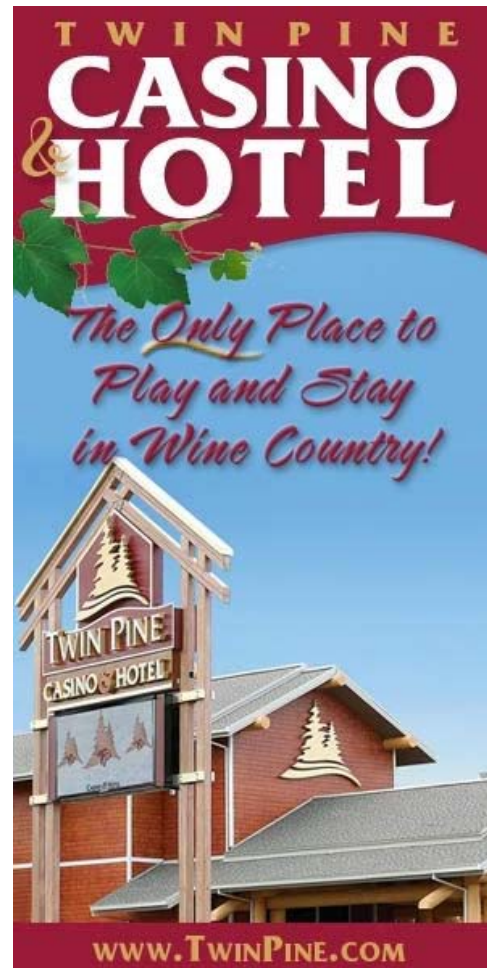
Where: 18000 Old Winery Road, Sonoma

Information: buenavistawinery.com

When: Open daily for tours and tastings 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

To see: "The Count of Buena Vista," a free, 20-minute play, takes place Saturdays at 1 p.m. through October 20

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Buena Vista Winery



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palomino grapes procured from Peru by Russians and planted at Fort Ross.

Now head of his family's wine business in California, Boisset Family Estates, the parent company behind such local wines as DeLoach

Vineyards, Lyeth Estate, Raymond Vineyards and JCB, Boisset is on a mission to restore the once-grand Buena Vista to its former glory after buying the 35,000-case Carneros-based winery in 2011 from Ascentia Wine Estates.

"We want to re-introduce what the state is all about, what a great region it is," Boisset said, "to celebrate the power and history of this place."

To that end, Boisset and a team of architects and landscape designers have spent the last year re-invigorating the neglected Buena Vista estate, beginning with the historic champagne cellars and caves on the property, which had been closed to the public since 1989, and unveiling them in a 200th birthday celebration of the count right before Labor Day.

"Buena Vista is such a beautiful facility and a special spot," said vintner Anne Moller-Racke of Donum Estate, who owned Buena Vista with her former husband Markus from 1981 to 2001. "Jean-Charles has the means, the foresight and the respect for history to do something very exciting."

The count was, to put it mildly, a colorful figure. He is credited with not only bringing cuttings of over 300 wine grape varieties to California, but also for building the first gravity-flow winery, digging Sonoma County's first excavated wine caves (employing Chinese labor) and using redwood barrels for fermenting and aging his wines.

Having served as the metallurgist in San Francisco during the Gold Rush and then chief assayer of the San Francisco Mint, Haraszthy also once predicted that "wine growing in (California) will, before long, exceed in value the amount of gold exported."

Anyone who loves a juicy tale most remembers Haraszthy as the man said to have been eaten by a crocodile in the jungles of Nicaragua during an excursion there in 1869, a legend whimsically perpetuated by Boisset's upside-down stuffed crocodile now hanging in the Buena Vista tasting room.

More momentous, though, is the fact that grapes are now being crushed in the Buena Vista cellars for the first time in decades and that the historic cellars are now open to the public after undergoing



Buena Vista Winery



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an extensive earthquake retrofit.

“We want people to touch the vats, to feel the energy,” said Boisset.

Brian Maloney, who makes the DeLoach wines, will be overseeing production of the Buena Vista wines with the help of consulting winemaker David Ramey.

“We’re going back to the future, to an old-fashioned, traditional way of making wine,” said Ramey. “To use traditional means without a lot of props is really fun.”

Buena Vista, known for its chardonnay, pinot noir, zinfandel and merlot over the years, is bringing back French Colombard. The white-wine grape once widely planted in California makes for a crisp, slightly spicy and very refreshing wine. The grapes come from the Russian River Valley.

Winemakers are also producing a limited-release sparkling wine from pinot noir and chardonnay grapes grown in Carneros, another nod to Buena Vista’s history and its once-celebrated Arpad sparkling wines, named for one of Haraszthy’s sons.

“We want Sonoma to shine at a grand level, with its diversity of geology and terroir,” added Boisset. “Our goal is to create a lot of excitement for the cellars and (for visitors) to rediscover old varieties that could be good.”






After 30 years of landscape neglect and “death by asphalt,” as James Lord of landscape architecture firm Surface Designs described, cobblestone from Belgium was brought in to mark the pathways around the buildings. A native garden of edible plants was put in.

“A winery is a place where people come to celebrate,” added Boisset. “What we want to communicate beyond the visual is the spiritual part.”

That goes as well for the Vortex, a pool of swirling water in front of the cellar’s entrance that Boisset, a committed devotee of Biodynamics, built to serve as both a gathering spot and symbol of “how we use energy in the world.”

Virginie Boone is a freelance wine writer based in Sonoma County. She can be reached at virginieboone@yahoo.com.

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