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Rebirth at Buena Vista

BY EMILY CHARRIER-BOTTS INDEX-TRIBUNE ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

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BUENA VISTA WINERY owner Jean-Charles Boisset pours a glass of sparkling wine Friday to celebrate Count Agoston Haraszthy's 200th birthday.

Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune

There's an oxymoron fermenting at Buena Vista Winery, where everything is new, yet simultaneously old again. Under the gregarious guidance of proprietor Jean-Charles Boisset, the winery is polishing its history and revitalizing the winemaking, the staff and the historic buildings themselves.

The asphalt was still warm and paint was still wet when members of the press gathered on Friday to view the renaissance in honor of winery founder Count Agoston Haraszthy's 200th birthday.

"We couldn't wait to have you come for the big day, which really is to honor the count," Boisset said.

Part museum, part historical theme park and, of course, part operational winery, the yearlong make-over restored the centerpiece of Sonoma's winemaking legacy. Boisset's vision was to return everything to its original condition, right down to the pick-axe marks made by the Chinese laborers who originally dug the wine caves more than a century ago.

"This building is fundamental to the history of California," Boisset said. "Our mission at Buena Vista is

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going to be to attempt to really bring back the history, in the building, in the wines.”

From the parking lot to the tasting room to the wine caves to the gardens, every surface has gotten a face-lift. Overseen by Naomi Miroglio, a principal at the San Francisco-based Architectural Resources Group, which specializes in historical restoration, it was a multi-million dollar project that, at times, required innovative solutions.

“I don’t know if you remember the building before. It resembled more of a bush than a building,” Miroglio said.

After removing hundreds of pounds of ivy that shrouded the 155-year-old stone winery building, workers had to drill vertical holes through the walls from top to bottom to install reinforcing rods and specially compounded cement. At one point it was discovered that the grout between the rocks had degenerated into dust and Miroglio admitted there was a critical moment when she feared an entire wall might collapse.

“We have some of the softest stone you’ll find on a building in California,” she said. “There was perilously little wall strength.”

Boisset expressed his pride in the project, saying, “Look at the skin of the wall. I know it’s not Versailles, but it’s as important as Versailles in history and meaning.”

In addition to restoring the original glory of the property, the winery seeks to educate visitors about the history of California and winemaking, as it played out at the Valley’s preeminent winery beginning in 1857. Large posters now greet visitors as they walk up the driveway from the parking lot, each bearing a different historical factoid. The newly planted Heritage Garden showcases eras of edible plants that served as food crops through history in the area of the winery, such as gravenstein apples, huckleberries, kale and Brunswick cabbage.

“It’s a variety of cabbage that came from the 1700s,” said James Lord, whose company, Surface Designs Inc., is handling the landscape architecture at the winery.

The tasting room now boasts a historical museum on the second floor that tells the story of the birth of winemaking in California and details Haraszthy’s pioneering role in its development. Boisset sought to honor the count even in death, by hanging a stuffed crocodile from the tasting room ceiling.

“The legend tells us that the count’s skeleton and beautiful skin ended up in a crocodile while he was crossing a river in Nicaragua,” Boisset said. “So, we have to have the crocodile as the count is still with us in his stomach.”

In his signature, flamboyant style, Boisset sought not only to deliver history on posters and artifacts, but also to bring it to life. It begins with mannequins representing Gen. Mariano Vallejo’s two daughters, who famously married two of Count Haraszthy’s sons, which greet visitors at the entryway. Boisset also hired historical actor and personality George Webber, known for his portrayals of Gen. Mariano Vallejo and Mark Twain, among others, to play Count Haraszthy nearly fulltime, both at the winery and across the country to spread the brand to restaurants and wine shops from coast-to-coast.

The winery is, after all, “not just restoration, it’s about wine,” Boisset said. In addition to preserving the building, he has restored the infrastructure to allow the winery to produce wines onsite once again. On Friday, visitors helped toss the first load of zinfandel grapes into the wine tanks Boisset had built in his native France.

“This is a very famous day at Buena Vista because we’re going to bring the grapes into the cellar again for the first time,” Boisset said, adding that wines will be made the old-fashioned way.

“We’re not set up like a modern winery, so we’ll be doing a lot of things the hard way,” said winemaker Brian Maloney, who will be joined in production by winemaker David Ramey. Maloney added that he referenced the historical catalogue of the winery when looking for what wines to produce, saying, “It was really an opportunity to look back and see what had been done.”

Boisset said this is just the first part of the renovation, which will continue over the next year to upgrade the property with terrace and garden spaces. He plans to create a variety of areas for history and wine lovers to gather and explore. “A winery is, so importantly, a place for people to celebrate. It has to be celebratory, a place to meet friends and enjoy,” Boisset said.

Buena Vista Winery, located at 18000 Old Winery Road, is open despite the ongoing construction. To learn more, go to buenavistawinery.com.

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