

THE

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Role Model

*A Vintner of Many Talents,
Carolyn Wentz Is Second to None
When It Comes to Running
a Family Wine Empire*

Rebuilding Buena Vista

THE STORY BEHIND THE RESTORATION OF
COUNT HARASZTHY'S HEROIC DREAM

story and photos by Randy Caparoso



Jean-Charles Boisset. "I draw parallels to the old Burgundy houses that are also in the Boisset Family—like Bouchard Aîné & Fils, which dates back to 1750, and J. Moreau & Fils, dating back to 1814. We need to be proud of our history and heritage. We want to play a part in the re-introduction of Buena Vista to the 21st century. We want people to come here from all over the world—yes, to taste Buena Vista wine, but also to experience its magnificent past."

This past August 31, Jean-Charles Boisset, the colorful hands-on President of Boisset Family Estates, proudly cut a red ribbon and sabered gushing bottles of sparkling wine in front of the doors of Buena Vista Winery's newly restored stone Champagne Cellar, leading to caves originally dug into the hills of Sonoma Valley in 1857. The occasion was the winery's symbolic "rebirth" and a commemoration of the 200th birthday of the "Count of Buena Vista"—Agoston Haraszthy, who founded the estate as California's first grand-scale producer of premium wine.

The day was an emotional one for Boisset, whose family acquired the Buena Vista brand and winery, along with a long-term lease of vineyards, in April 2011. Says David Ramey, the esteemed winemaker hired as a consultant by Boisset immediately following the purchase: "I've only worked with one other person, Christian Moueix, who was as fascinated with California history as Jean-Charles Boisset. This is a tremendously exciting project because of Jean-Charles's determination to restore Buena Vista to the way it was originally intended."

The full extent of Boisset's commitment is now plain to see in the gleaming, multi-million dollar restoration of Buena Vista's iconic Champagne Cellar, once shrouded completely in ivy. This building had not been used as a winemaking facility since the 1970s, and had been completely shuttered since the last big earthquake in 1989. Off came the ivy, revealing the native stones, being steadily pulled apart by the plants. Then the real work began, guided by a San Francisco firm specializing in historic restorations.

Says Boisset, "The original winery buildings are a gateway to the past—it is a matter of paying tribute to that past." To enhance the facelift, the asphalt road leading to the old stone Press House (built in 1862, now serving as a tasting room) and Champagne Cellar was completely torn out and replaced by a walkway of hand-chiseled cobblestones imported from Belgium, flanked by smooth paths of decomposed granite set by fine crushed cement, plus beds of edible plants common to 19th-century Sonoma. This dogged devotion to detail comes not a moment too soon, following 44 years of neglect at the hands of owners for whom faithful restoration of the historic property was a low priority.



A bottle of Buena Vista Zinfandel looms in the foreground, the restored Champagne Cellar behind it.

It is clear to see that another thing that fascinates Monsieur Boisset to no end is Agoston Haraszthy himself, who spent money like there was no tomorrow to fulfill, for all intents and purposes, an outlandish, if not heroic, dream. Soon after founding the winery, Haraszthy went to Europe, traveled through five countries, and brought back some 100,000 cuttings of over 350 different grape varieties—so little time, so many grapes to try in the New World! At least 100 different grapes were planted on 500 acres in Sonoma, some on the valley floor, but most on hillsides, which Haraszthy favored.

In 1863, Haraszthy launched the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society, an entity that promoted Sonoma as a region and advocated the expansion and modernization of winemaking. “We will bring back the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society,” proclaims Boisset, who has created a new collection of wines with that name in honor of Haraszthy’s organization and its endeavors.

Boisset is also preparing to plant a Historic Vine Collection on the hillside between the Champagne Cellar and Press House. “Our Historic Vine Collection will consist of 15+ grape varieties to give visitors to Buena Vista a small glimpse of Count Haraszthy’s incredible vision,” Boisset says. “I relate to Agoston Haraszthy in so many ways—his willingness to innovate, to take risks. I feel like I’m his partner today, taking over from what he started 150 years ago.”

However, Haraszthy also drove his own winery into financial straits. The onset of phylloxera soon began to undo many of his viticultural experiments, and an economic depression in the mid-1870s eventually forced investors to liquidate the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society. Prohibition shut down the

Buena Vista winemaker/consultant David Ramey; Brian Maloney (in top hat), Boisset Family Estates Director of Sonoma County Winemaking; and Attila Balla, principle of Vinum Tokaj International.



winery for good, but in 1943 Frank Bartholomew was able to revive it with a new bond, keeping it going until selling to Vern Underwood of Young’s Market Company in 1968.

Underwood modernized the

in 2007, followed by still another multi-winery sale to Ascentia Wine Estates in 2008, before finally leading to the 2011 acquisition (of just Buena Vista) by Boisset Family Estates.

Perhaps as a reminder of the pitfalls of vine ambition, Boisset has also installed an upside-down life-size replica of an alligator on the ceiling of the Buena Vista tasting room: not as a symbol of French allegiance, but in reference to Haraszthy’s demise in 1869 in Nicaragua, where while working on a new project (a sugar plantation) he purportedly fell into a river and was taken away by alligators.



The newly released Buena Vista 2011 Vinicultural Society French Colombard: a radical departure from the winery’s established varietal line with its pronounced mineral and melon/pear/lemon sensations, fused into a decidedly lightweight yet silky, slinky, scintillatingly tart-edged, mouth-watering sensations.

operation by building a new winery and planting a large vineyard in the Carneros region, which subsequent owners Marcus and Anne Moller-Racke expanded even further, turning it into the Buena Vista Carneros Estate, supplied by 935 acres of estate-grown grapes, after acquiring it in 1981. The Racke Group sold the brand and most of the property to Allied Domecq in 2001, setting off a decade of corporate musical chairs: Fortune Brands took over in 2005, then selling to Constellation Brands

Next Step: Heritage Wines, Crafted in Uncompromising Fashion

Following the August 31 ribbon cutting, Boisset invited guests to drop trays of old vine Carignane—representing Buena Vista’s first red wine pick of 2012—into one of their spanking new, open-top, Burgundian oak fermenters. According to Brian Maloney, Boisset’s Director of Sonoma County Winemaking, “We will be concentrating on heritage grapes like Carignane, Zinfandel and Charbono on the property, as well as small lots of Pinot Noir. Winemaking techniques will be traditional—strictly hand-punchdowns, and basket-pressing.”

Says Boisset, of the path he has set his winemakers upon: “As Lao Tzu once put it, we are ‘thinking about the source.’ We want to help lead a rediscovery of old varieties that have all but disappeared—like French Colombard, like Carignane and Chenin Blanc and old-style California wines like Angelica, which may not be well known to people today but are so important in the history of California wine. That’s my vision for Buena Vista.” ■■



Buena Vista’s iconic Champagne Cellar.