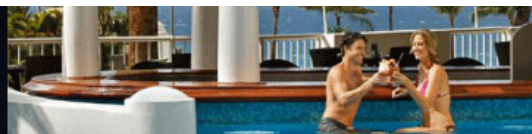


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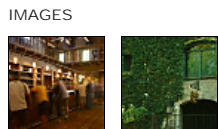
Buena Vista winery, state's oldest, freshened up

Carey Sweet Thursday, March 8, 2012

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Lindsay Baum The tasting room features wood paneling.



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Sometimes, even a landmark needs updating. And so Buena Vista, the oldest commercial winery in California, has been getting a little refreshing. It has gone through numerous ownerships over the years, but last April owners Ascentia Wine Estates sold the 1857 property to the Boisset Family Estates Collection. Recent changes are

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minor, but Boisset is putting its own touches - sometimes theatrical - on the towering stone building set on 564 acres just northeast of downtown Sonoma.

As I ventured up the long, winding drive framed by massive eucalyptus trees, the main winery building came into view, three stories sheathed in scaffolding and draped in dark cloth for what my tasting host would later explain was "vine maintenance" - stripping away ivy clinging to the walls, not grape vines.

The vibe: It feels like a state park, because it nearly is, touching up against the 400-acre Bartholomew Memorial Park. The grounds beckon with picnic

tables, and the tasting room is housed in a historic 1862 press room. An upstairs loft is lined with displays of winery history, from its founding by Agoston Haraszthy, who planted some of the first European varieties in California, to its near-destruction by the great earthquake of 1906, to its restoration in 1940 by then-owner Frank Bartholomew and winemaker André Tchelistcheff.

The experience: History practically pulses through the stone walls, wood paneling and a polished bar that easily accommodates 20 tasters. It's a comfortable place to

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spend time enjoying the five wines poured for \$10, and staffers are well-versed on the property's heritage as well as the Carneros region.

But the highlight is the newly introduced "Taste with the Count" experience. For an extra \$10, a costumed gentleman complete with stovepipe hat, brocade vest and lavish gray beard with sideburns will lead you on a 45-minute tour into the cellars, followed by a tasting. I admit, I worried it would be goofy - yet local actor George Webber does a spirited rendition of Haraszthy as he leads guests among "his" gardens, explaining "his" 19th century life.

The team: Boisset Family Estates, founded in Burgundy in 1961, today controls more than 20 wineries in the United States, Canada and Europe. It's run by President Jean-Charles Boisset, who is married to Gina Gallo of E&J Gallo. The consulting winemaker is David Ramey, who worked with Chalk Hill and Rudd Estate, and also runs Ramey Wine Cellars.

The wines: With its location in Carneros, Buena Vista focuses on cooler-climate Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Merlot and Syrah. The tasting leads off with a glass of 2009 sparkling brut (\$40) from Carneros Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes, then heads into a 2007 Chardonnay (\$36), a 2007 Pinot Noir (\$42), a 2007 Merlot (\$25), and a tasting room-only offering, a 2008 Viticultural Society Zinfandel (\$32).

The extras: I'm not sure Haraszthy would have recognized some of the things in the gift shop, such as shiny, hard-case tube purses, but I suppose he'd appreciate that selections are mostly elegant wine books and accessories rather than, say, bobbleheads with his likeness. Even if you don't sign up for the tour, you can enjoy periodic, free 20-minute performances by Webber and other troupe members.

If you go: Buena Vista Winery, 18000 Old Winery Road, Sonoma. (707) 938-1266. buenavista winery.com. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. "Taste with the Count" is offered on Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 11 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 2 p.m. with reservations requested.

Nearby: Gundlach Bundschu, 2000 Denmark St., Sonoma, (707) 938-5277, gunbun.com; Ravenswood Winery, 18701 Gehricke Road, Sonoma, (707) 933-2332, ravenswood-wine.com; Sebastiani Vineyards, 389 E. Fourth St. Sonoma, (707) 933-3230, sebastiani.com.

Rating: Rating: THREE STARS

Carey Sweet is a San Francisco Chronicle contributor. wine@sfchronicle.com

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