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Wine: Storied history marked by Sonoma's Buena Vista Winery

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By FRED TASKER — McClatchy-Tribune News Service

Probably no other California winery boasts a history as colorful as that of Buena Vista Winery of Sonoma.

It's a story of colorful European nobility, a soldier from the 1917 Russian Revolution's White Army and finally a top-ranked French wine producer coming to the rescue.

Two hundred years ago in Hungary's famed wine city of Tokaj, Agoston Haraszthy was born to a winemaking family of minor nobility. He learned to make wine by age 5.

As an adult, he started a family, but, frustrated by Hungarian social and commercial immobility, he came to the United States by 1840. In 1849 he took his family by wagon train to California.

Visiting Sonoma County, he was enchanted by its wine-making potential. In 1857 he built the state's first progressive winery, with gravity flow winemaking, California redwood barrels and a

series of aging caves dug by Chinese workers. He imported thousands of top-quality European vines and dubbed himself "The Count of Buena Vista."

Then tragedy happened. In the late 1860s his vines were attacked by the root louse phylloxera. He traveled then to Nicaragua to make rum, but was killed by a crocodile there while crossing a river. Buena Vista Winery went bankrupt.

Ensuing years only made things worse, with the financial panic of the 1880s, the earthquake of 1906, the Great Depression, Prohibition and World War II.

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In 1943, finally, a new family bought the winery, rebuilt it, replanted its grapes. And in a stroke of genius, it hired the genius Andre Tchelistcheff as consulting winemaker.

Tchelistcheff was born in Russia, and, in the 1917 Revolution joined the White Russian Army opposing the Bolsheviks. When his side lost, he had to flee. He ended up in Paris studying wine, later emigrating to California.

Hardships weren't over. In the 1960s a series of ownership changes again hurt the winery's image.

But in 2011, new owners again arrived. Jean-Charles Boisset of Boisset Family Estates, producers of fine wine in France's vaunted Burgundy region, again has renovated the old winery and planted new vines.

To mark the 200th anniversary of Haraszthy's birth, the company is releasing a new series of wine from Sonoma. Yet again, hopes are high.

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-2011 Buena Vista Sonoma Chardonnay: golden delicious apples and toast, medium body, long finish; \$15.

RECOMMENDED:

-2011 Buena Vista Sonoma Sauvignon Blanc: crisp and lively, with citrus and green apple flavors; \$15.

-2010 Buena Vista Sonoma Pinot Noir: aromas of camellias, flavors of red raspberries and espresso; \$15.

-2010 Buena Vista Sonoma Zinfandel: aromas and flavors of black plums and black pepper, spicy; \$15.

-2010 Buena Vista Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon: aromas and flavors of earth, cassis and spice, full and smooth; \$15.



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