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SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA

BERGER ON WINE

DAN BERGER

Filling Mondavi's giant shoes

Back in the 1980s, I dined with Italian wine impresario Angelo Gaja, a great student of world wine history and as passionate a wine-maker as I have ever known.

Hours into dinner, Gaja said: "California has a great history of making fine wine, and Bob Mondavi has been the person who brought this message to the rest of the world. But Bob won't live forever. In decades to come, who will be the spokesman telling of California's great wines?"

The question has lurked in my memory for years, notably since Mondavi's death four years ago. Mondavi's passion for great wine, his vision for California's role in that world, and his quest to link wine, food, and the arts under a single umbrella was a message he touted around the world.

The Mondavi Mission, as he called it, had him on radio and TV shows, doing interviews with the world's top newspapers and magazines, and he attended wine symposia around the world, always carrying the message of California wine's greatness.

Not always silver-tongued, Mondavi was such a dynamo that until a few months ago, I had no idea how to answer Gaja's question. You can't teach passion. Last Friday I had my answer. And it was a completely unlikely person who now can accept this mantle, if he isn't too busy doing a lot of other stuff.

Jean-Charles Boisset, French-born and reared, and scion of one of the world's largest wine companies, is really a Burgundy lover at heart. And since Burgundy makes some of the world's finest (and priciest) wines, Boisset most naturally has a passion for French wine.

But starting in a low-key manner in November 2003 with the purchase of De Loach Vineyards in Sonoma County, Boisset has quickly established his credentials as a lover of California wines as well. All great wine, really.

Today his company not only makes of a lot of fabulous French wines, but it has a growing portfolio of prestigious U.S. wines. And his role in the last few years has been to speak of the greatness of various regions of the world, of their history, and of the vinous spirituality of various locations.

Boisset's latest act of wine passion was unveiled for about 200 guests Friday — the rebirth of the old Buena Vista cellars.

Founded in 1857 by Agoston Haraszthy, Buena Vista is considered the earliest of California wineries. Friday's look at the renovation of this property in the foothills east of the town of Sonoma coincided with Haraszthy's 200th birthday.

Boisset has spent the last year renovating the old property, putting it back into a state he envisioned it looked like when the founder roamed the acres.

More than anyone I have met in the last 40 years watching this industry, Jean-Charles Boisset has the passion for great wine and the vision few around him see — and he has the theatricality to unabashedly display this passion in what might seem to be outrageous ways.

The man seems most at home wearing velvet or silk sports coats, cravats, top hats and assorted other gear that on another might seem affected.

Not Boisset. The garb may be eye-catching, but his words are infused with a glow all about quality based on soils, hard work and vision. He speaks with electricity and delight. His quest to investigate all the potential greatness of California wines seems boundless and genuine.

Since buying Raymond Vineyards in the Napa Valley, Boisset has transformed that project into a series of visual and sensory experiences that could seem a bit over-the-top, including a red-light-swathed, velvet-bedecked tasting room for members-only functions.

But he speaks of Napa in truly reverent tones, and the Buena Vista restoration is an homage to all of Sonoma County, he said. All of this is from a man who knows wine and talks about it with a conviction born of his knowledge.

I doubt there is a winery owner anywhere in America who knows as much about wine as he does, nor anyone who conveys as much joy and passion about it.

Only 42, he's now operating more than 20 large wine companies in France and the United States, and you might assume the man is too busy to deal with such things as winery openings. Au contraire — I suspect he loves to do such things.

Indeed, the event last Friday was only an en primeur look at the real opening Buena Vista will have a year from now, when the restoration is complete. (The 200 guests Friday had to dodge 100 workers doing all manner of work.)

This project will focus on small lots of Sonoma County wines, many from obscure grape varieties that once flourished here but were abandoned as

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DAN BERGER / For The Press Democrat

Jean-Charles Boisset walks the grounds of the Buena Vista Cellars east of Sonoma during an event last week to celebrate the rebirth of the oldest California winery, founded in 1857 by Agoston Haraszthy.

GIANT: Boisset makes impact

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wine. Wine is now being made in the old winery building for the first time in a half-century, though the majority of Buena Vista wine will still be made in a major winery miles down the road.

Moreover, Jean-Charles has developed a line of wines, called simply JCB, from various areas of the world that call attention to different terroirs. The key to all these wines is wine quality. And he has resurrected Haraszthy's old Buena Vista Vinicultural Society brand.

That a Frenchman could be suggested as the next spokesman for California wine may seem odd, but just hearing him extemporize on great wines and California's role in that subject is to buy the message. But that's not all: He has a couple of other items in his resume that qualify him.

For one thing, not long ago he married Gina Gallo, winemaker for the world's largest wine company, family-owned E&J Gallo. And the couple recently bought a home in the center of the Napa Valley.

The man who built that property was Robert Mondavi.

Wine of the Week: 2011 Clayhouse Adobe White, Central Coast (\$14) — This Viognier/Sauvignon Blanc blend is slightly floral, and has a little (19%) Grenache Blanc for a trace of white peach. Though not totally dry, it is well suited for a wide range of light seafood.

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