

On Wine

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GEORGE STARKE
Up and Down the Wine Roads

What a wine auction

I know, every year I write that this year's Auction Napa Valley was the best ever and could not possibly be improved upon; yet every year, I am proved wrong. But, still I'll say it again: Auction Napa Valley 2014 was spectacular in every way, from the opening venue at Charles Krug Winery and the colorful Avenue of Banners to greet the guests to the gaily-decorated, huge tent on the green at the Meadowood Resort where the live auction was held; it could not be improved.

The idea of an auction was hatched in 1981 in a conversation between Bay Area socialite Pat Montandon and Robert Mondavi at an Oakville eatery where the question was asked, "Why can't Napa Valley have an auction to serve the valley's charity needs, similar to Burgundy's Hospices de Beaune whose proceeds serve the charity needs of its community?"

They approached the Napa Valley Vintners with the idea, and so Auction Napa Valley was born. The first NV auction was 1981, and the total revenue was \$140,000. The highest bid was \$24,000 for a case of Opus One. This year, the auction raised \$18 million, bringing the total revenues since the first auction to \$120 million, which, after expenses, will be dispersed to charities and not-for-profit organizations in Napa Valley.

On a personal note, a number of years ago when I was involved in a serious auto accident, much of my recovery was spent in an intensive care room at the Queen of the Valley Medical Center in Napa. The room had a brass plate on the wall outside the door which read, "This room was made possible by funds from the Napa Valley Vintners." I joined others in our valley who have benefited from the Auction Napa Valley's proceeds.

Crazy big bucks: While we are on the subject of money, Penfolds, the huge Australian wine company, decided to produce the most expensive wine in the world (excluding old bottles that have been sold at auctions). The wine that it produced is the 2004 Penfold Kalma Vineyard, Block 42, Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine was "bottled" in glass ampoules. Because of the labor involved, only 12 were made. The price, in case you'd like to add a few to your cellar, is \$165,000 each. Are they worth it? Buy one and let me know. Better yet, buy one and send it to me. I'll let you know.

Culinary magic: Recently, the Robert Mondavi Winery added a new attraction at its



Sitting in the Bubble Lounge, Count Agoston Haraszthy (George Webber) looks on as Jean-Charles Boisset discusses his plans for the historic Buena Vista Winery that Haraszthy founded in 1857.

Sasha Paulsen/Register photos

Buena Vista Winery: Its past is its future

Boisset and 'the Count' introduce a historic treasure

SASHA PAULSEN

In the 1850s, a Hungarian adventurer, a man of boundless ideas and enthusiasm, arrived in Sonoma, after a varied career that included creating a town in Wisconsin, serving as a sheriff in San Diego, and being charged with embezzling gold while working at the San Francisco Mint. (The charges were later dropped.)

At each stop along the way, the self-named "Count" Agoston Haraszthy, an ardent agronomist, planted wine grapes, but it was not until he came to Sonoma that he found the place where his dream of "purple gold" would thrive.

Haraszthy bought a dry-farmed vineyard, and in 1857 opened a stone winery named "Buena Vista — "beautiful view." This, California's first premium winery, was the expression of his passionate conviction that California could create exceptional wines.

According to Buena Vista's "History of California Wine," Haraszthy predicted that "wine-growing in this State will, before long, exceed in value the amount of gold exported."

Relentlessly, he promoted the idea through work and research. He and his son, Arpad, who had studied in Champagne, brought back roots and vines from Europe, as many as 300 varieties, inspiring other winemakers. These were the glory days of Buena Vista.



Jean-Charles Boisset, a native of Burgundy, France, visited Buena Vista Winery as a boy, and later bought and restored the historic winery to pay tribute to California's wine heritage.



Among the wines now being offered at Buena Vista is a chenin blanc, a Champagne brought in from France and a Tokaji that Boisset imports from Hungary to honor the Hungarian background of Buena Vista's founder.

Visiting Buena Vista Winery

Buena Vista Winery is at 18000 Old Winery Road in Sonoma, about five minutes from Sonoma's downtown plaza. The winery is open daily for tours and tasting from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., excluding major holidays. Special activities include a free "Count of Buena Vista" performance; family tours of the Champagne Cellars (\$10 per adult; kids free); barrel tours and tastings (\$35 per person); and a "Be the Count" blending experience (\$100 per person; \$80 for Wine Club members); reservations are required. Picnic hampers may be ordered 24 hours in advance. For more information or to make reservations, visit the website, BuenaVistaWinery.com

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Unfortunately, the history recounts, "his grand ambition for the future of the wine industry far exceeded the demand for California wine and Agoston Haraszthy de Mokea, the insatiable Count of Buena Vista, was ultimately forced out of his creation by his own investors."

Haraszthy went next to Nicaragua, where he disappeared after falling from a tree into an alligator infested river.

In subsequent years Buena Vista endured the rocky fate of an early California winery, trials that included phylloxera, Prohibition, and a public whose tastes tended to beer and whiskey. Wine production ceased as Haraszthy's mansion became the home of a wealthy couple who eschewed grapes for to raise more than 200 angora cats. Wine production resumed when journalist Frank Bartholomew and his wife, Antonia, bought the property in 1943. They brought to it their friend, Andrei Tchelistcheff, the Russian immigrant and European trained winemaker who led California into a new era of winemaking. Nonetheless, the winery passed on to a series of owners, corporate and private.

A century after Haraszthy's disappearance, a French schoolboy visiting California with his grandparents, came to Buena Vista. They were travelers from Burgundy, where the winemaking history goes back 2,000 years, yet as Jean-Charles Boisset describes it, "I thought this place was magic."

"We tasted the wine back in our hotel room," Boisset said. Returning and someday restoring the property, he said, "became an *idée fixe*."

As the Boisset family wine interests grew from their Burgundy base into an international enterprise, Boisset returned to California, first as a student and then to manage their U.S. interests. He purchased Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena and DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma, but had not forgotten Buena Vista.

"I was obsessed," Boisset said. In 2011, he was finally able to purchase the old winery, and "working in partnership with the Count," he said, he set out to rebuild and "continue the Count's vision."

BUENA VISTA TODAY

To find Buena Vista in its secluded setting against the eastern Sonoma hills, leave your car in the asphalt parking lot and stroll along a forested path, marked by banners that tell the winery's history.

Chronologically, they move from the present to the past, concluding with the Native Americans who first lived in this tranquil spot, and underscoring the eerie sense that you are moving back in time, even before the two simple old stone buildings that hold California's history become visible. And then the Count himself appears.

OK, it is really George Webber, the engaging history buff who leads tours in Sonoma and Napa, but his elegant manners, not to mention his top hat and cutaway coat, set the spell of Buena Vista to work on the imaginative: Has the ghost of the Haraszthy escaped the crocodiles of Nicaragua to hover over his beloved Buena Vista?

The Count is next joined by M. Boisset himself, in modern dress but nonetheless the perfect counterpart for an ebullient dreamer from another century.

"This beautiful lady was a bit faded," Boisset said, gesturing to the Press House, that has become the tasting room. "The most important thing was to revive winemaking in the most historic wine building in California."

For Boisset, this goal included making the historic Buena Vista wines, planting the furmint grapes, the most widely grown variety in the Count's native Hungary, and bringing to life again the second Buena Vista building, the Champagne Cellar, which had been unused for decades.

Today, the Cellar is the center of winemaking, the deep cellars once again hold barrels of aging wine. To this Boisset has added one of his dazzling strokes of fancy: A "Bubble Lounge," decorated in the Art Deco style of the 1920s and '30s, with oyster-colored furnishings, a gleaming white player piano and towers of glistening Champagne glasses.

"A little surprise," Boisset said, pouring some of the Champagne he brings in from France. "We want to engage people in a fun but noble way, to provide a sense of history, and a sense of time, of timelessness. The future of Buena Vista is the past."

In contrast to this speakeasy luxury, the tasting room in the old Press House suggests a more rugged, early California adventure. Here, a mannequin sheriff stands guard by a display of Buena Vista Legendary Badge, a robust red blend, the bottle of which is emblazoned with a gold badge honoring the Count's days as a sheriff.

Other displays in the room recount the history of Buena Vista; a preserved crocodile dangles from the ceiling, hat in teeth, a wordless reminder of the Count's

unfortunate finish.

"We need to be true to our history and to the quality of the wine for our children," said Boisset, as he introduced the Buena Vista wines. Boisset is married to Gina Gallo of the Gallo wine-making family, and they have twin daughters.

Among the wines are a Private Reserve chardonnay and pinot noir; the Vinicultural Society collection of small-production wines that "honor the winery's pioneering spirit and contribution to California wine-making"; the Heritage collection that includes an imported Hungarian Tokaji Aszú, a Cream Sherry, Port and the La Victoire Champagne; a Carneros Collection, and The Count, the "Founders Red wine that honors Haraszthy's legacy and bold vision."

Buena Vista wines are now sold in 25 countries, Boisset noted, although many of the wines are available only at the winery.

Work is still underway on the restoration, Boisset said as he described plans to come, everything from a heritage garden to theater in the plaza.

On July 12, Buena Vista will host a Living History day, that will include a re-enactment of the Bear Flag Revolt, in which Boisset will play the part of Victor Prudhon. Visitors are encouraged to come in period costume of the 1860s and learn about the history of Buena Vista, said Boisset who has also commissioned a book, "Sonoma Wine and the Story of Buena Vista," which was written by the noted local historian, Charles L. Sullivan.

From Aug. 7-24, the winery will present Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew."

Details for these and other winery events are available at the website, BuenaVistaWinery.com.

Is there an irony that it's a Frenchman who is so enthusiastically introducing the legacy of California wine?

"It's part of discovering America," Boisset said. "I think people in the U.S. want to feel their identity, their history. We are here to engage people with this. We want people to come here to enjoy themselves, to take time to enjoy their time. 'American' is a phenomenal way of life."

"It's fun to have dreams and to help people to dream," Boisset added. "What is exciting is to help create the dream. Our dream — the dream of the Count and I — is really to bring (forward) the vision of history, music, art, food, the past."

Sitting quietly beside him, "The Count" smiled.

If the ghost of the founder of Buena Vista is, indeed, anywhere in the vicinity, he is surely one happy spirit.