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Buena Vista Winery's new owner sees future in past

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George Webber is dressed as Count Agoston Haraszthy, who built a stone winery on the Buena Vista property in 1857. Photo: Jason Henry, Special To The Chronicle



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Workmen swarmed the grounds of Buena Vista Winery one recent chilly spring morning, taking advantage of a break between storms to resume this Sonoma property's massive makeover.

A crew labored on the asphalt road leading up to the estate, while stonemasons laid cobblestone and landscapers trimmed a boxwood maze. At the far end of a newly cobbled courtyard, a large fountain sprayed fine arcs of water, the droplets glistening like glass beads in the sun.

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Thanks, ironically, to a deep-pocketed Frenchman, California's oldest winery is undergoing some much-needed surgery.

In the three years since Jean-Charles Boisset, son of a prominent Burgundian wine negociant, bought the troubled winery, Buena Vista has been buffed, earthquake-retrofitted and repositioned for the future. Whether Boisset can turn the enterprise around and

raise the visitor count after years of decline, it's too soon to say. But he has lavished funds and energy on the effort.

"It's an absolute emotional pursuit," says the ebullient 44-year-old, who heads Boisset Family Estates, the U.S. arm of his family's holdings. Despite his background in finance - he has an MBA from the University of San Francisco - Boisset insists that this investment is an affair of the heart, an obsession he has nurtured for more than three decades.

On his first trip to California, as an 11-year-old, Boisset visited Buena Vista with his French grandparents, both schoolteachers.

The youngster soaked up the story of the swashbuckling Hungarian count, Agoston Haraszthy, who had built a stone winery on the property in 1857. And back in their hotel room on the Sonoma plaza, his grandparents poured him a taste of Buena Vista Chardonnay.

"I was totally enamored and wanted to stay here," recalls Boisset. "I went home and told my parents, 'This is where we need to spend time.' "

Boisset's parents were likely too focused on their negociant enterprise - now the third-largest wine firm in France - to act on business tips from their 11-year-old, but they did permit him to attend high school in the U.S., at the French International School in Bethesda, Md. After college in Great Britain - his parents wanted him closer to home - Jean-Charles returned to the U.S. for graduate school. For several years, he worked with his sister in the family business in France, but all the while Buena Vista remained a preoccupation.

"We tried to acquire the winery for many years," says Boisset, "but others were more clever than us."

In 2011, he had another chance when the financially strapped investor group that owned Buena Vista, the fourth owner in 10 years, put it on the block. By that time, the brand had lost a lot of steam. Visitor traffic had plummeted, and the two neglected stone buildings on the property were being strangled by ivy. One of them, a cellar added by Haraszthy in 1864, had been unusable since the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989.

Today the ivy is gone, the stones repaired, and the damaged cellar made sound again with vertical steel rods hidden in the walls. In August 2012, 18 months after Boisset's purchase, Buena Vista reopened the historic cellar with a splashy gala attended by a Haraszthy descendant and the mayor of Tokaj, the famous Hungarian wine town.

Boisset, a flamboyant personality with a penchant for theatrics, believes he can breathe new life into the winery by highlighting its 19th century roots, creating a history-rich



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visitor experience akin to touring Williamsburg or Monticello.

"We need to spend much more time talking about the past," says the voluble Boisset. "We're not running a software company. Especially in wine, centuries give credibility."

Boisset's alter ego, the charismatic Count Haraszthy, has been resuscitated for the purpose. Costumed in top hat and brocade vest, a local actor playing Haraszthy gives tours and private tastings, recounting his wine innovations in accented English - a Hungarian accent, presumably.

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