

# Sonoma

**RAISE A GLASS**

**TO BUENA VISTA**

Jean-Charles Boisset restores glory days  
of California's first winery. Page M12

## LANDMARKS



Jason Henry / Special to The Chronicle

Jean-Charles Boisset in a special events room featuring JCB Cremant de Bourgogne at Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma.

# Buena Vista's new owner sees future in the past

By Janet Fletcher

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 glinting like glass beads in the sun.

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 negotiant, 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 lav-

ished funds and energy on the effort.

French wine negociants' son has loved oldest winery in state since visiting at age 11

#### If you go

**Buena Vista Winery:**  
18000 Old Winery Road, Sonoma; (800) 926-1266. [www.bueनाविस्ताwinery.com](http://www.bueनाविस्ताwinery.com)  
Tasting room open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Reservations required for some programs and events.

“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 swash-buckling 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

negotiant 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 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 charis-



matic 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.

To commemorate the count’s untimely end in an alligator swamp in Nicaragua, a taxidermied alligator hangs from the tasting-room ceiling. Visitors can purchase a “Be the Count Experience,” a 90-minute guided session in the art of blending, as the count might have done it.

History buffs can also purchase a bottle of Legendary Badge, a red blend with a badge for a label, honoring the count’s tenure as an early California sheriff. In the Bubble Lounge, a swank private salon, guests sip sparkling wine while the count informs them that he pioneered

the *méthode champenoise*, the traditional Champagne production technique, in California.

If some visitors find this all a tad cheesy, Boisset isn’t worried.

“It’s about flamboyance and dreams,” he says. “You want to be transported. A winery is not just about cooperage and malolactic fermentation. Is wine about how we make it or the pleasure it provides?”

Boisset’s personal style, which recalls Liberace, probably raises fewer eyebrows in Napa than in Burgundy. He is fond of crystal chandeliers, red socks and shiny evening jackets in gemstone colors. A bachelor until 2009, he nurtures his libertine image. Boisset once told Chronicle wine editor Jon Bonné that a meal without wine was “like kissing a woman with no lips.”

*Boisset continues on M20*

**Above: A barrel aging room in a cave that was dug out by Chinese workers, their pickax markings still visible, in the 1800s at Buena Vista Winery. At left: George Webber plays “the Count,” offering tours and private tastings.**

Photos by Jason Henry / Special to The Chronicle



Jason Henry / Special to The Chronicle

George Webber is dressed as Count Agoston Haraszthy, who built a stone winery on the Buena Vista property in 1857.

## Looking for future in past

*Boisset from page M13*

Four years ago, in a union of global wine dynasties, Boisset married Gina Gallo, the Gallo Family Vineyards winemaker and granddaughter of Julio Gallo. The couple have twin daughters who will turn 3 years old in May. They reside in Napa, on Wappo Hill, in the palatial residence designed by Cliff May for Robert and Margrit Mondavi.

Boisset says Margrit Mondavi encouraged him to buy the house when it was auctioned after her husband's death. The symbolism is potent. Wine columnist Dan Berger has suggested, provocatively, that the dynamic Burgundian has assumed Mondavi's mantle as head cheerleader for California wine.

"I think the Buena Vista effort is commendable," says Berger, "and his passion is simply

contagious. He doesn't seem to have an end to his joy at being involved in this industry. Jean-Charles could easily be criticized for his ostentatious ways and the overwhelming enthusiasm he shows, but it seems to be unquenchable."

In addition to Buena Vista, the Boisset Family Estates holdings in California include Raymond Vineyards in Napa Valley, and DeLoach Vineyards and Lyeth Estate, both in

Sonoma County.

Former DeLoach winemaker Brian Maloney now crafts Buena Vista's wines, with help from consultant David Ramey. In this arena, too, Boisset is looking back, reviving varieties like French Colombard and Charbono that most of the state's wineries dropped long ago, and planting a demonstration parcel with a few rows of Furmint, the principal Tokaj grape, to make a Hungarian-style dessert wine. But the winery's focus remains Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the Carneros appellation.

The winery's 50,000 cases are processed at the winery and at custom-crush facility nearby, from contracted Sonoma County grapes. The Sonoma property, with its edible gardens, cobblestone courtyard and lovingly restored 19th century stone buildings, is Boisset's fantasy — or, perhaps, his folly.

"I don't buy Dali or Picasso; I can't afford it," says the vintner. "But to me, this is the most interesting painting we will have in the family."

None of the property's prior owners invested as

deeply as his family has, says Boisset, because the return on investment wouldn't justify it.

"I feel very similar to the count in many ways," admits Boisset, who has a Haraszthy-size appetite for adventure.

"I have no Burgundian friends who've invested here. They all think I'm crazy. They're content with the world they live in, but for me, there's so much more to discover."

*Janet Fletcher is a Bay Area freelance writer and cookbook author. E-mail: fletcher@foodwriter.com*