

Valley^{of}the Moon

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REPORT
FROM NEPAL

BOISSET'S
BUENA VISTA

HISTORY

THE
HISTORY OF
BUENA VISTA

*It is California's most historic monument to wine.
But who know its real history? Just ask Jean Charles Boisset.*

Story DAVID BOLLING



If wine were a religion, the rock-hewn walls of Buena Vista Winery would be its holiest New World shrine, and Count Agostan Haraszthy would be its patron saint.

But like Junipero Serra, the Franciscan friar who was both loved and reviled after founding a string of California missions with Indian labor, and who now appears headed for papal sainthood, Agostan Haraszthy was not universally appreciated in his own time during a remarkable life that was apparently cut short by a hungry Nicaraguan alligator.

Somehow his logical place in history—as father of the California wine industry—keeps being qualified by asterisks and howevers.

He knew how to make money, but not how to keep it, some have said. He had his fingers in too many pots. He overleveraged his assets. He was a brilliant promoter, a fast learner, an oenological pioneer, but not so great a manager.

That said, Buena Vista, the Sonoma winery he founded in 1857, was a visionary creation, the birthplace of California's wine industry, site of the first authentic champagne production in the state and a model for all that followed.

And yet, despite its status as the state's oldest premium winery, it continues to remain just a little bit obscure, tucked into the dead-end of a scenic lane on the outskirts of Sonoma, on the way to nowhere, except back in time.

Over the course of the last century and a half, Buena Vista has survived various bankruptcies and cash flow failures, it lived through the great phylloxera plague of the 1860s, it survived the 1906 earthquake and Prohibition and numerous ownerships—all the while producing some outstanding wine—but it almost succumbed to incremental neglect. The old press room had been salvaged, seismically stabilized and converted to a tasting room in the 1980s, but the signature building, the three-story, limestone winery itself, with



COUNT AGOSTAN HARASZTHY was the visionary founder; JEAN CHARLES BOISSET was the visionary savior. Today the visions of both men are married in the restored and reborn winery.

its parallel caves cut by hand deep into the hillside with Chinese labor, was deemed unsafe after the Loma Prieta earthquake and closed to the public.

Enter Jean-Charles Boisset, the flamboyant French winemaker, entrepreneur, bon vivant and shrewd investor who had been tracking Buena Vista since a childhood visit with his grandparents. The old stone edifice made a lasting impression on 11-year-old Boisset, and when he grew up he knew he wanted to own it. There were three failed attempts to buy it, but in 2011 he finally succeeded. And unlike, perhaps, any owner since Haraszthy, Boisset had a deep passion for Buena Vista's history and a grand vision for what to do with it. "Our future," he likes to say, "is in our past."

That sentiment is a family trait. His grandparents—both history teachers—wanted him, he says, "to see that remarkable place where California was born, and California wine was born. It is a history we are proud of, a history that inspires us."

And there was no winery edifice in the state more authentically historic, and historically authentic, than Buena Vista. So he wanted to restore that history, preserve it, promote it, teach it, demonstrate it and market it. He just didn't realize, at the time, how much that vision would cost.

On first meeting JCB—as many people call him—and upon encountering his inevitable red socks, his brilliant smile, his boyish charm, it's easy to assume it's all show. It's not. He is a consummate showman, and his whole life unfolds like an elaborate production, but it's all real. And so is his devotion to the history of the place.

To restore the winery building, Boisset brought in Naomi Miroglio, one of the top historical architects in the country, a preservation perfectionist who had also worked on restoring the Napa Valley Opera House, Beringer Winery and the CIA campus at Greystone.

Also recruited was the Santa Rosa structural engineering firm MKM & Associates who collaborated on an innovative



technology called center-core drilling to tie the dangerously unstable stone building together.

Instead of the conventional solution—constructing an unsightly internal steel cage, and running visible bolts through the sides of the building—the MKM crew drilled vertically through the walls, creating holes four to six inches in diameter into which they inserted reinforced steel rods connected to eye bolts in the floor. They then injected a special resin down the holes and into adjoining crevices to replace the ancient, disintegrating mortar.

As a result, says MKM engineer Eric Kreager, “the outcome is much nicer. You’re not only reinforcing the wall with the rods, but you’re pushing the epoxy into all the cracks. The building then has a little bit more flexibility, which can be a benefit.”

And, there is not a single bolt visible on the outside or the inside walls of the structure.

The real test of the restoration process occurred at 3:20 a.m. on August 24 of last year. That’s when the magnitude 6 Napa earthquake struck, killing one person, injuring as many as 200 and causing an estimated \$600 million in damage, mostly in the city of Napa.

Buena Vista was unscathed, but without the center-core restoration (the cost of which makes Boisset shudder and he refuses to disclose it), the three-story winery building would have been rubble.

Said retail operations manager Tom Blackwood, in the aftermath of the quake, “It would have been the end for this building. It would have been difficult to rebuild.

Subsequent examinations by both Kreager and Miroglio revealed no structural damage, and Boisset reported that “the only thing that fell over was a wire bird cage.”



THE RESTORED BUENA VISTA WINERY

building anchors the facility’s history with invisible center core wall studs. The third floor wine tool museum exhibits an exhaustive collection of European vineyard tools. Jean Charles Boisset grips some imposing implements of wine production.



Having created a secure stage on which to re-create Buena Vista's lost history, Boisset began to dress the set. He added a stuffed alligator to the tasting room, a dramatic reminder of Haraszthy's unfortunate fate.

Inside the reconstructed winery he created the Bubble Lounge, an elegant champagne cellar with much crystal, period furniture and a player piano.

And then, he converted the entire, cavernous length of the winery building's third floor into a museum of winemaking tools, complete with a sound and light show that practically makes the floor tremble.

The tools—hundreds of them—were purchased from “a guy in France,” artfully arranged along the winery's stone walls and illuminated by a symphony of colored lights. There are grafting knives, enormous forks, pomace cutters, picks, tools used to make barrels and even the giant, evil-looking syringes used to inject insecticides into the soil in an effort to kill the phylloxera louse that invaded French vineyards as well as ours.

The 20-minute show includes a dramatic narration recounting the history of winemaking and the history of Buena Vista along with the disembodied voice of Count Haraszthy himself.

Boisset offers up this extravaganza as a brilliant means of administering a dose of history along with his wine. For \$25, visitors are treated to four wines, the museum show and a guided tour of the winery.

The history of Buena Vista, and all it represents, shall not be forgotten, even if a Frenchman, with a passion for American history, has to teach us what we have forgotten, or never knew. ❧

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THE BUBBLE LOUNGE at Buena Vista celebrates the historic California introduction of commercial methode champenoise by the count's son, Arpad Haraszthy. **GEORGE WEBBER** (at right) channels the count during winery tours at Buena Vista.



OUR FUTURE IS IN
OUR PAST.

Jean-Charles Boisset

