

WINES & VINES

Buena Vista Winery

Extensive renovation of the 'White House' of California's wine industry

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The Buena Vista Winery caves were restored by Jean-Charles Boisset to appear as they did in the 1850s.

At the site of Northern California's oldest winery, years of work costing untold millions received an abrupt and violent test in the pre-dawn hours of Aug. 24, 2014. The severe shaking of a 6.0-magnitude earthquake woke Jean-Charles Boisset in his hilltop residence in Napa Valley as well as Tom Blackwood, who endured an even more violent experience in his west Napa home. After both men both made sure their families were safe, their thoughts immediately turned to Sonoma Valley and the Buena Vista Winery, which was founded in 1857.

Boisset Family Estates, the company owned by Boisset's family, had just spent a fortune restoring the winery, and Blackwood—who has worked for Buena Vista for more than a decade—personally oversaw restoration of the dilapidated building into a working winery.

Blackwood recounted that morning to *Wines & Vines* about six months later. A native San Franciscan, he said he was riding a bus on the Bay Bridge when a section of the bridge collapsed in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, yet he was more scared during the Napa quake. The fear turned to worry when he began thinking about the stone winery in Sonoma. Those concerns were put to rest just after daybreak, when he heard from workers who arrived to find that the walls were still standing. "We had people here first thing in the morning, and the building had been tested, and it held up and it did wonderful and thank God," Blackwood said.

Without the restoration, which was completed in 2012, Blackwood is certain the winery would have been turned into a pile of rubble. "This would have been the story of the Napa quake. It would have been how this historic winery collapsed, because there's no doubt these walls would have fallen in."

What prevented those walls from falling in was a steel skeleton that had been almost surgically installed inside the stone walls, which are more than 150 years old and have suffered through several decades of neglect as well as a few other earthquakes. It was, in fact, the 1989 earthquake that had left the building shuttered and empty until the Boisset family purchased it in 2011. The acquisition by the family that owns one of the largest wine companies in France is now described as the conclusion of Buena Vista's "corporate period," in which it changed hands five times between 2000 and 2011.

A cradle of California winemaking

For most of its modern history, the two iconic stone buildings known as the Champagne Cellars and Press House had served as the hospitality center for the high-volume and mediocre-quality Buena Vista brand. Visitors to the historic property tasted wines produced at a large facility located on the Sonoma County side of the Carneros AVA.

The entire story of Buena Vista, however, stretches back to the 1850s and the very beginnings of viticulture and winemaking in California. The winery's original founder was Hungarian immigrant "Count" Agoston Haraszthy, who in 1857 established the estate vineyards and built the winery. Haraszthy, who brought hundreds of *vinifera* cuttings to California, is credited as a founding father of the state's wine industry.

To keep Buena Vista operating, however, Haraszthy had to assume a host of investors through the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society, and they forced him out of the business in the 1870s. The society couldn't overcome the challenges of Phylloxera and a weak demand for American wines; it went bust in 1878 and sold the estate at auction. The property came under the ownership of a wealthy and reclusive couple who passed it to the Catholic Church, and the estate ultimately came under the power of the state of California. Following Prohibition, the property became an estate winery once again in the 1940s, under the ownership of the Bartholomew family, who bought it sight unseen through an auction. The Bartholomews worked with André Tchelistcheff to release their first vintage in 1949 and produced wine from the estate until 1968, when they sold it to the founders of the distributor Young's Market. The German wine and spirits company A. Racke acquired the estate in 1979 and would eventually sell it to Allied-Domecq in 2000.

Jean-Charles Boisset—the charismatic American face of Boisset Family Estates—kept track of the small estate in Sonoma as it was bought and sold. “My eyes honestly were always riveted on this one,” he said. “I missed it three times. I tried to buy it in the ’90s, tried to buy it in the early 2000s and missed it in the mid-2000s.”

Why Boisset was so captivated by Buena Vista is a story that’s becoming as well connected to the winery as the tale of its founding by Haraszthy. Boisset traveled through California in 1981 with his grandparents, who were schoolteachers. The visit to Buena Vista was one of the last on the trip, and the 11-year-old Boisset (who didn’t speak English) was enchanted by the property through the words of a Swiss tour guide. “I saw this winery and said to myself, ‘Wow, I could never have fathomed history of that magnitude in the state of California,’” he said. “It became kind of an obsession for me, always to want to have something in the United States.”

Boisset would later attend Lycee Rochambeau near Washington, D.C., and then helped expand the family’s business in the United States, including acquiring DeLoach Vineyards, Lyeth Estate, Lockwood Vineyard, Amberhill, Raymond Vineyards and, ultimately, Buena Vista.

He said the timing was just right in 2011 for his family’s company to buy the Sonoma property when it did, because he doesn’t think they would have had the means to afford a renovation that honors the property’s heritage before then. Boisset acquired the historic winery in Sonoma, while Jackson Family Wines purchased the Carneros winery, which now supports its multi-faceted Pinot Noir program.

Although the company won’t reveal how much it spent on the renovation, Boisset does say they were well aware it was going to be expensive, but they felt they couldn’t do anything less than the very best. He said not doing so would be like repairing a column of the White House with cheap stucco, or treating Versailles with similar disrespect. “I’d rather you drive over me, or you put me in this fireplace and you get rid of me, if we were to do a half-ass job. If you count 100 years from now what’s big? It’s not anything about finance here. It’s about the soul, it’s about the essence, it’s about the roots, it’s about the magnetic vibration about what the California wine industry is all about,” Boisset says. “It’s not about us—it’s not even about Buena Vista alone—it’s about the beginning, the birthplace, and when you think about the birthplace you’ve got to be respectful of it, and you’ve got to be doing everything possible to bring again those memories of the past and to tempt our minds and our imaginations to go beyond.”

Strengthening from the inside

Blackwood first started working with the Buena Vista brand in 2004 as part of Allied Domecq and stayed with the winery through its various owners until Boisset purchased the property in 2011. “Jean Charles and I met right out here in the courtyard, and we immediately went into the building and went upstairs,” he says. “I remember the third floor and walking around kind of gingerly—I didn’t go up there much because it didn’t feel very secure—and him saying we’re going to bring winemaking back, and we’re going to bring life back with the history. He said: ‘It’s really not that bad. You should have seen some of the chateaux and properties we’ve restored in France.’”

The original Buena Vista estate, which once sprawled across several hundred acres, is now situated on a 9-acre parcel near the city of Sonoma. The property is a sliver of land that runs along a creek. Alongside the creek is a road that stretches from a gate to the winery and tasting room at the back of the property.

All winemaking operations including the barrel cave, private lounge and a museum of winemaking equipment are housed in the three-storey Champagne Cellars building, or the larger of the two stone buildings. The smaller stone structure, known as the Press House, contains the tasting room.

The goal of the renovation, which began in 2012, was to make the winery appear as it did in the 1850s. Cello & Maudru and Siteworks were the general contractors who worked with historic property specialist Architectural Resources Group, MKM & Associates engineers and RDC Construction. The first job entailed removing a thick covering of ivy that sprawled across almost the entire façade of the Champagne Cellars. When the ivy had been removed, Blackwood said workers erected scaffolding around the entire building so they could inspect and restore the original stone walls.

Workers dug out 4 to 6 inches of the original grout and then brought in a specialist to match a new grout with the stones. The building's decrepit roof was torn off, and with the top of the structure's walls exposed, it allowed another set of workers to employ the relatively novel renovation process called "center-core drilling."

The process involved a series of long holes about 4 to 6 inches in diameter drilled from the top of the building's walls to about a foot below ground. After workers drilled through the stone walls they inserted a long steel rod into each. To provide even more support, the rods are also linked to eyelets set in the thick timber beams on the interior of the structure. Once all the rods were in place, Blackwood said workers filled the holes with epoxy cement.

Blackwood notes that the nearby Press House was restored under previous ownership with a very common method of installing metal plates to the exterior of the stones. While effective, the process does mar the appearance of a structure. "There's a skeleton structure within the walls holding everything together," he said of the center core drilling method. "You maintain that original beauty, that original look and feel."

A working historic winery

Inside the Champagne Cellars, new wooden fermentation tanks are set beneath huge, thick beams of redwood, many of which are original, old-growth timber used when the winery was originally built. The 45-hectoliter tanks were custom designed by François Foudrier and feature stainless steel lids that can be removed for fermentation or closed to serve as storage or blending vessels.

Brian Maloney, a native of Sonoma, is the director of winemaking for the Boisset wineries in Sonoma County, and he oversees winemaking at Buena Vista with the assistance of consulting winemaker David Ramey. A full-time cellar master, Adrian Ochoa works onsite at Buena Vista throughout the year, and the winery also brings on an intern during harvest. For 2015, Maloney said the intern would be an enology student from Hungary who is working in Sonoma through the Sonoma/Tokaj Sister City Association.

The Buena Vista Private Reserve Pinot Noir, Zinfandel and Grenache, Syrah, Valdiguié Cinsault and Charbono wines are produced at the historic winery.

Zinfandel, Cinsault and Syrah are from various vineyards located near the winery on land that was once part of the historic estate. Pinot Noir grapes come from the Sonoma County side of the Carneros AVA, and the Grenache is sourced from a vineyard near the small town of Glen Ellen, in the northern part of Sonoma Valley.

The Charbono grapes come from the Peter Heitz Vineyard in the Calistoga AVA of Napa Valley, and the Valdiguié is from the Al Frediani Vineyard, which is also in Calistoga.

“It’s fantastic to see an old winery breathe again,” Maloney says. “Without a doubt it would be easier to do it all at DeLoach, but the wines wouldn’t have the same sense of being from Buena Vista. One of the most overlooked aspects of *terroir* is the winery itself, where the fermentation is performed. The vats, the microbiota, the walls and atmosphere of a cellar all influence how a wine is made—often in a more tangible fashion than what gets discussed in terms of vineyard blocks and clones.”

Maloney’s preference is to let fermentation begin spontaneously, and he said he had some doubts that he could get the must to ferment in that first vintage because the winery had been empty for so long. All of the wine, however, fermented just fine in the first vintage except for one lot of Carignan that had to be inoculated. In 2013 and 2014, Maloney said he didn’t have to inoculate anything. “Our goal is to avoid inoculations,” he said. “We feel strongly that a natural fermentation brought about by native yeast reveals the wine and its *terroir* in a better fashion.”

Grapes are picked “early and cold” and are sorted by hand on a Milani vibrating sorting table and then carried by a Milani elevator conveyor to an Enoveneta Tema EVO destemmer. The destemmed fruit is collected in half-ton bins that are dumped into the vats with a forklift. A forklift driver can access all of the vats in the historic winery via two large doors. Maloney said the cellar is naturally cold enough to provide for a cold soak of a few days if the grapes are picked cold. Fermentation generally takes about five days to start and is managed mainly with twice per day punch downs performed with a stainless steel punch down tool. Maloney said he will often treat the Zinfandel, Syrah, Cinsault and Charbono with a few aerative pump overs as the fermentation progresses, but the Pinot, Valdiguié and Grenache just receive punch downs.

For the Pinot and Valdiguié he’ll press at dryness with a Marzola PV10-H basket press, but the other varieties can be held on the skins for additional extraction if necessary. The wine then ages in barrels by Demptos Napa Cooperage, Trust Cooperage, Ermitage-Berthomieu Tonnellerie, Saury Tonnellerie, Canton Cooperage and Seguin Moreau in a barrel cave dug into the hillside behind the building and accessible from the main fermentation area. A second cave had been used for wine storage but is in the process of being converted into a private tasting area. Haraszthy and his son Arpad dug those original caves, and one is still stained black from the fire Arpad kept burning for months to try and foster the secondary fermentation of California’s first sparkling wine program. While Arpad didn’t have any success with those early vintages, the younger Haraszthy did go on to operate a successful sparkling wine company with a winery in San Francisco, Calif.

Boisset dug a new cave outside of the building at the far end of the property to provide extra wine storage and additional water storage. The cave includes a concrete wall that serves as a dam holding back 28,000 gallons of water. A large pump is connected to the tank and supplies the winery’s fire suppression system. Blackwood said because of the proximity to the creek the winery couldn’t install a typical water tank, so the cave provides needed storage to support the hospitality center as well as the required additional water supply.

Blackwood said in addition to the increased water supply all of the necessary infrastructure like power, heating and air conditioning had to be upgraded as well to support both a winery and visitors center. Buena Vista is currently hosting 50,000 visitors per year, but Blackwood is confident that can be doubled soon. “We hope to see that,” he said. “Historically that’s where we were at one time, and we want to get back to that, and I think we will.”

The Boisset flair

Part of the reason why the Boissets have found success in the United States has come from incorporating Jean-Charles' flamboyant personal style. A recent "Napa Gras" party at his Raymond Vineyards this year featured burlesque dancers, circus acrobats, and Boisset greeted guests by pouring them glasses of JCB Champagne while suspended from the winery ceiling by a harness.

The Boisset flair is on display at Buena Vista in the new Bubble Lounge. Art Deco theme designed to evoke a sense of *The Great Gatsby* as well as the Champagne-fueled exuberance of post-World War I Europe and the United States.

After walking through the painstakingly restored winery, stepping into the decadent room decorated with all-white furniture and gold, chrome and crystal accents and a player piano is a bemusing, almost jarring experience. Blackwood says that's the intention: to provide an experience that, while in juxtaposition to the historic winery, still fits with an overriding theme of sparkling wine and celebration.

When Boisset purchased Buena Vista, he also announced he was bringing back a Buena Vista sparkling wine. The wine is fermented at the winery, but the riddling and disgorging happens at another facility. The room also serves as a venue for Boisset's personal JCB brand, which includes wines from Champagne as well as California sparkling wines.

"What we feel is very important is to bring you through the past 150 years," Boisset says. The tasting room in the Press House is decorated in a way to evoke how Haraszthy may have lived on the estate. As visitors progress through the winery and get a better understanding of the history of California wine, the experience eventually leads to the Bubble Lounge, which expresses how the 1920s were a time when the United States arrived on the world stage. "We wanted it to be very reminiscent of the era."

The room will also eventually include a "Cabinet of Curiosities," which will feature items referring to Haraszthy's international travels and serve as a blending lab, which is a feature at Boisset's other California wineries.

Just finished this past winter is a museum of winemaking equipment on the third floor of the Champagne Cellars. The museum is not just a staid collection of dusty implements but a multimedia exhibit narrated by an actor portraying Haraszthy and featuring lights, video and displays that have been mechanized to illustrate various steps of winemaking, grapegrowing and related activities like cooperage.

Some of the features of the completely redone grounds designed by the firm Surfacedesign include a hedge maze, multiple picnic areas and the "Promenade of Pioneers." Located along the road that visitors walk to reach the estate, the promenade is a collection of life-size figures depicting notable people from a range of historic eras and periods that include European and Californian winemaking, famous explorers, founding fathers of the United States as well as several others.

"That's what it's all about. We are a place where younger people, older people, middle age people should congregate. A winery is a place to meet, to exchange, to have a great time, to be inspired, to depart into that imaginary journey where it goes into your subconscious...and this is what a winery is all about," Boisset grows ever more animated, sitting on the edge of his chair, gesticulating to help make his point. "A café is great for that, a restaurant is great for that, a bar is great for that, but a winery has everything for it."

And with that, as if on cue, a member of the winery staff sticks her head in the door to let Boisset know a group of journalists has assembled in the winery courtyard and are waiting for him to start a tour.

“Excellent! Let’s go!” Boisset exclaims while jumping from the chair and rushing to the door of the lounge.

“Do you want the piano back on?” the employee asks.

“Yes, yes please!” Boisset shouts, already through the door on way to continue the show for another audience.