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

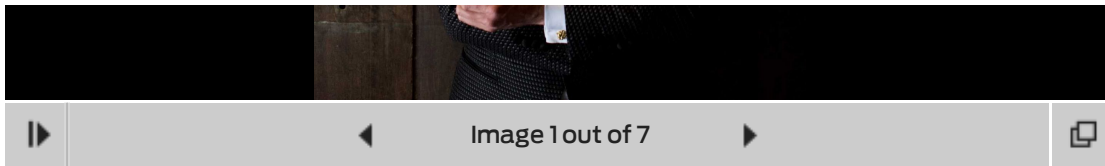
Frenchman's lifelong passion for 19th-century Sonoma winery sees it through much-needed rejuvenation



Workmen swarmed the grounds of Buena Vista Winery one recent morning, taking advantage of a break between storms to resume this Sonoma, Calif., 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 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-

Jason Henry/Contributor

"It's an absolute emotional pursuit," Jean-Charles Boisset says of his efforts to revive the historical Buena Vista Winery since taking ownership three years ago.

retrofitted and repositioned for the future.

"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. He soaked up the story of the swashbuckling Hungarian Count Agoston Haraszthy, who had built a stone winery on the property in 1857. Later, his grandparents poured him a taste of Buena Vista chardonnay.

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

Boisset's parents were likely too focused on their own business - now the third-largest wine company in France - to act on business tips from their son, 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, 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," Boisset says, "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 property's two stone buildings were in disrepair -



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.

Boisset thinks 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 in Virginia.

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.

History buffs can 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 swank Bubble Lounge, guests sip sparkling wine while the count informs them that he pioneered the méthode champenoise, the traditional Champagne production technique, in California.

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.

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 turned 3 in May.

"I think the Buena Vista effort is commendable," wine columnist Dan Berger says, "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. They hope to revive varieties including French Colombard and Charbono that most of the state's wineries dropped long ago and plant 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 a 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."

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