

It's one long party at Sonoma's Buena Vista Winery

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The champagne cellars at Buena Vista Winery. Photo: Boisset Collection

[Buena Vista Winery](#) is one of the oldest wineries still in operation in California, and its relatively new owner, 45-year-old Frenchman Jean-Charles Boisset, is on a mission to make sure the winery is returned to its proper place in the story of the rise of wine in the state. One way he is doing that is to ensure that every visitor to the Sonoma spot has a rollicking good time.

Step into the Buena Vista champagne cellar, housed in an elegant, weathered 1864 building, and you realize that this is no demure wine-country tasting room where visitors gently twirl their wine-glasses and discuss the relative merits of cabernet versus pinot noir.

Sure, there are rows of wine barrels as you enter and a glimpse into the caves that extend into the hillside. But if you swing into the room at the left you feel you are at a 1920s Great Gatsby party. Everything is white or sparkly – the tufted couches and chairs clustered into intimate arrangements, the player piano, the crystal chandelier, the stack of champagne glasses that sit permanently on the coffee table in the center of the room. Bottles of champagne line the mirror-backed bar.



The Bubble Lounge at Buena Vista Winery. Photo: Boisset Collection

This is the Bubble Room, one of the many inventions of Boisset, who has up-ended the business of wine tasting in Napa and Sonoma counties. The scion of a French négociant who helped turn his family's business into an international empire with more than 20 wine estates spanning France, California, and Canada, Boisset is a wine country iconoclast. He is charming, irreverent, and completely dedicated to increasing the "fun" in wine tasting.

If white isn't your color or champagne isn't your favorite drink, there is always the Red Room at Raymond Vineyards off the Silverado Trail, another property of Boisset Family Estates. That room looks like a Belle Epoque private club with red velvet settees and red velvet draped from the ceiling and walls, leopard skin rugs and pictures of Marilyn Monroe dotted throughout the room. Right next-door is the Crystal Cellar, where Raymond's wines ferment in huge stainless steel tanks. Specially designed cabinets hold Baccarat crystal and there is light show that flashes red, blue, and green.

The parties that Boisset throws at Raymond Vineyards are legendary, particularly his Napa Gras masquerade party every February during Premiere Napa Valley when members of the wine trade come to town. Boisset transforms Raymond into a wine bacchanal with pounding music, costumes, and writhing bodies. He hires trapeze artists to dangle from the ceiling, actors to bathe in tubs of chocolate, and scantily clad performers to dance. The wine and champagne (his JCB brand made in Burgundy) flow freely. And no one seems to have more fun at these parties than Boisset, who goes around greeting everyone, kissing men and women on their cheeks, and posing for photos. This year he even dangled from a trapeze.



Jean-Charles Boisset. "I don't feel a winery should be that interesting, snobbish, condescending experience. A winery should include people, should bring people in." Photo: Frances Dreitzel

"A winery for me is like a theater, an amazing place where people should experience the best," said Boisset, who tends toward the theatrical himself, with his Tom Ford and Lanvin suits and ubiquitous red socks that set off his fanciful Louboutin shoes. "We do what we feel is exciting. I don't feel a winery should be that intimidating, snobbish condescending experience. A winery should include people, should bring people in."

The results of Boisset's efforts have been noteworthy. The members of his wine club are much younger than the average Napa visitor and they come more frequently, too, he said.

"The most outrageous winery that I have ever been to!" wrote one visitor on Yelp! "This is no ordinary place. So much character so eclectic! A must visit for cool people only!"

Winemakers have long dipped into the unusual to attract visitors to their wineries from the Beringer Brothers' 1884 [Rhine House](#) built to look like a German mansion to Dario Sattui's 107-room [Castello di Amorosa](#), complete with moat and torture chamber. But Boisset has brought a new stylish touch to Napa, according to Paul Franson, a longtime valley observer, wine writer, and editor of Napa Life, a weekly periodical about the region.

"Jean-Charles certainly has brought his own style to the valley," said Franson. "He is very flamboyant. He has shown that in many ways. He is also very sincere and passionate about making very good wine and also about local history, which is sort of interesting since he is from Burgundy."

Now Boisset has applied his sense of whimsy to the third floor of the Champagne Cellars at Buena Vista Winery. Only this time, there is substance with the style.

Boisset has converted the large space into a museum of historic wine tools dating back to the 18th century. These antique plow blades, bill hooks, secateurs (one-handed pruning clippers), wine pullers, pomace cutters, and harvest basket are all essential tools for growing and harvesting grapes, and many of these tools were once actually used.



The tool museum at Buena Vista Winery. Photo: Drew Kelly

But in true Boisset-style, the tools are not just hanging on the walls. They are incorporated into a Disneyland-style show complete with movement, music, red, blue, and green flashing lights and a 17-minute video that moves from screen to screen in each of the room's four corners. The film is "narrated" by the founder of Buena Vista, Agoston Haraszthy, one of the state's most influential 19th-century winemakers, and tells the history of wine in California. The tool museum opens to the public Wednesday April 1 and is included with the \$25 wine tasting. One of the closing sentences of the video announces, "You will now try some of the purple gold."

Boisset hopes to lure people with the flash, and feed them some history in the process. Although his family only got into the wine business in the 1960s, he has a deep reverence for the history of wine both in France and in California. For Boisset, the history of wine is the history of culture. Wine reflects man's taming of the earth, his journey to create a magic elixir out of a cluster of grapes. The tools hanging in the exhibit are an extension of that quest, and the "extension of your mind and your brain [creating] something very unique which is wine."

"Wine itself is a civilization, it's a culture," said Boisset. "It's part of who we are as individuals from the transformation of that beautiful agricultural product to what it becomes. So it really is a product of civilization. I call it an elixir of God."

Buena Vista Winery is the most historic of Boisset Family Estates properties in California. It was founded in 1857 by Haraszthy, a Hungarian who had come to California in 1849. At that time southern California, particularly around Los Angeles and San Bernardino, was the center of the wine industry. The Mission grape, first brought to the state by Franciscan fathers in 1778, was dominant, but the wine it produced was flat, low in acidity and nuance. To overcome this defect, winemakers often added brandy, creating port and angelica, a sweet white wine.



The tool museum at Buena Vista Winery. Photo: Drew Kelly

Haraszthy was convinced that California's future lay in wine. He had planted his first vineyard in San Diego and then moved north, planting a succession of vineyards near San Francisco until he relocated to Sonoma in 1857. He became one of the state's biggest wine promoters, writing about the future of the grape and embarking on a state-sponsored trip to Europe in 1861 to bring back 100,000 grape cuttings.

Haraszthy transformed Buena Vista into a 6,000-acre showcase. He was one of the first to employ Chinese winery workers, the first to dig a wine cave to store wine, the first to use redwood for barrels, and one of the first to build a gravity-flow press. By 1858, Buena Vista was the second largest winery in the state, producing about 12,000 gallons of wine. It was so famous that Harper's magazine did a big spread on the winery in 1864.

The entire operation went bankrupt and Haraszthy died in 1869, as legend has it, (but no proof) by being eaten by an alligator in a river in Nicaragua. But over the years he has become a legend, even earning the nickname "Father of California Viticulture."

Boisset first came to Buena Vista with his family in 1981 when he was 11. He thought then that he would like to own the winery at some point. When he returned in the 1990s to expand his family's operations in California, Boisset tried to buy Buena Vista five different times but was always outbid.



Painting of Count Agoston Haraszthy. The Haraszthys brought in investors to create Buena Vista in 1857. Photo: Frances Dinkelspiel

Boisset finally managed to purchase Buena Vista in 2011 and he went on a mission to completely renovate the property. The building holding the champagne cellars had been closed to the public ever since the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989, although the press house next door had already been retrofitted. Boisset hired specialists to shore up the champagne building. Instead of installing metal braces on the exterior of the building, as was normally done, Boisset's engineers drilled holes into the stone façade to create an interior skeleton of sorts to buttress the walls. The structure was strengthened to withstand a magnitude 7.0 earthquake. On August 24, it was put to the test when a 6.0 earthquake struck Napa at 3:20 a.m. The building was undamaged.

Boisset was determined to elevate Buena Vista's profile, to return it to what he considered its proper place in the story of the rise of California wine. One of his first endeavors was to hire a preeminent wine historian, Charles Sullivan, to write a history of Buena Vista. "Sonoma Wine and the History of Buena Vista" also tells the history of wine in Sonoma County, a history as important as that of Napa County, but one that is not as well known.

But how to convey this history to visitors, many of whom are tasting their way winery by winery? Boisset hit upon the idea of hiring an actor, George Webber, to play Count Haraszthy and to tell his life story, and the history of wine in California, as people wander through the vineyards.

But Boisset wanted more history. When Boisset's sister, Nathalie Bergès-Boisset, met Philippe Bérard in France and he told her about his 30,000-piece collection of old farm implements, Boisset knew he needed to have them. What better way to convey the history of wine than through the physical objects used to make it?, he reasoned. The family acquired the collection, displayed part of it in France, and brought the rest to Sonoma.

Boisset's enthusiasm for the history of wine in California, and Buena Vista in particular, is so sincere that one has to forgive him for his slight exaggerations. The marketing materials claim that Buena Vista was "California's first premium winery," and "before there was a California wine world at all, there was Buena Vista." Both of those statements are untrue. While Haraszthy's winery is historically significant, other wine makers were making good wine – even in Sonoma County – before him.

During a recent tour, Boisset stated that Buena Vista made the state's first sparkling wine using the méthode Champenoise from the Champagne region of France. But that, too, is an overstatement. Pierre and Jean-Pierre Sainsevain, two brothers who took over their uncle's vast vineyard in Los Angeles, actually made the first sparkling wine in California. They brought in a champagne maker from France in 1855 and made two vintages before going bankrupt in 1862.

Haraszthy's son, Arpad, made his first vintage of champagne in 1861. In 1863, however, none of the 10,000 bottles of sparkling wine at Buena Vista "sparkled." The entire vintage had to be dumped at great cost. (Arpad Haraszthy went on to successfully make a champagne — the first truly successful California sparkler — in 1866 but with a partner not affiliated with Buena Vista, according to Sullivan.)

Buena Vista is, however, the oldest winery still in operation in California, which gives it all the bona fides it needs. There are a cluster of buildings in Rancho Cucamonga that are the remnants of a winery founded in 1839, but wine is no longer produced there.

"I have always been charmed by the oldest stones of the California wine world," Boisset told Sullivan. "I've admired its amazing sense of place and revered its history as California's oldest premium winery."

If you go:

[Buena Vista Winery](#) is located at 18000 Old Winery Road, about five minutes from the Sonoma Plaza. [The tool museum will open April 1](#) and will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. with shows every hour on the hour. The last showing will be at 4 p.m. For \$25, visitors can taste four to five wines and visit the museum. Tickets for a museum-only tour are \$10.

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