GUILDSOMM

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Agoston Haraszthy & The Story of Buena Vista

The object of my travels is especially to note down everything in which the Europeans surpass us, and afterward lay them before the citizens of the United States.

– Agoston Haraszthy, *Grape Culture, Wines, and Wine-Making*

Few in the annals of wine history have been on the receiving end of more fake news and false titles than Agoston Haraszthy. Google him and the following lies appear: he was a count and a colonel (he was neither), he was the father of modern California viticulture (not totally inaccurate, but arguable), and he introduced Zinfandel to the United States (roundly disproven).

But these falsehoods and exaggerations should not detract from this flamboyant man's very real and impressive accomplishments. During his time in the Americas (1840 – 1869), Haraszthy was a pioneer in every sense, seeming to thrive on the uncivilized edge of the New World. He helped to found Sauk City before Wisconsin was a state, became the sheriff of San Diego back when it was a mere village of 200, and led San Francisco's newly minted US Mint. Most importantly for wine lovers, he established Sonoma's Buena Vista, considered by many to be California's first premium wine estate.

Yet Haraszthy's viticultural influence was not confined to Sonoma. He was a charismatic and vocal champion of California's fledgling wine industry at large. Like a 19th-century Robert Mondavi, Haraszthy traveled to Europe and across the United States promoting his wines and those of his neighbors, seeking inspiration and constantly rallying for the industry's improvement. Though his legacy has become something of a caricature, the California wine industry owes much of its early success to his efforts.

Coming to America

Agoston Haraszthy was born in 1812 in the Hungarian city of Pest, well before it was united with, and appended to, Buda. At age 28, he relocated to the American frontier. Though he claimed to be a political refugee, his biographer and great-great-grandson, Brian McGinty, asserts that his journey had more to do with his love of adventure and enterprise than any sort of real political pressure.

Haraszthy first settled in what would become the state of Wisconsin. While there, he engaged in many seemingly unrelated pursuits, linked only in that they were the region's firsts: operating the area's first steamboat, opening one of the area's first gristmills, and founding Wisconsin's first official town, Sauk City, which he humbly proposed be named Haraszthy. Though primordial America was stocked with immigrants, "Count" Haraszthy (as he liked to be called) stood out from the crowd. His was a particularly colorful character, and dubious allegations followed in his wake, including one wherein he strangled a wolf to death with his bare hands.

In his previous life in Hungary, Haraszthy had owned a farm that raised both silk worms and wine grapes. Agriculture, specifically grapevines, would prove a lifelong interest—a constant in an otherwise spastic and fragmented resume. He even planted vines on his Wisconsin ranch, though they perished in the frigid winter conditions. Today, their resting place is the location of the thriving Wollersheim Winery.

When news of the Sierra Mountain gold load reached Wisconsin's collective ears, Haraszthy packed up his family and headed west. But instead of making his way north with the rest of the 49ers, he turned south toward San Diego. There, he retired the "count" honorific and took up "colonel"—a rank he likely never achieved. His time in San Diego was just as fruitful as his stint in Wisconsin, both entrepreneurially and politically. He became the untamed and relatively unpopulated county's first sheriff, and while presiding over the rule of law, also built the area's first prison. He was elected to the State Assembly and once again turned to agriculture, being sure to include grapevines among his fruit trees and other produce.

But Haraszthy's eye for investment kept flicking north. At this point, a remarkable amount of gold was being funneled from the inland mountains through the developing metropolis of San Francisco. In 1854, the government established a mint to process all this newfound wealth, and Haraszthy, who had experience as a metallurgist, was appointed its assayer. The Haraszthy clan was once again uprooted, and once again attempted to grow grapes, this time on a property just south of the city. While the climate did not kill the vines, as happened in Wisconsin, conditions were still too foggy and cold at both locales to ripen the fruit for proper wine production.

Never one to depend on a single revenue stream, Haraszthy supplanted his Mint income with a variety of sidelines. One of his investments would prove especially problematic. Haraszthy owned a portion of a private smelting business that was run by a few of his friends. This came to be seen as something of a conflict, and in 1856, it was recommended that Haraszthy be terminated from his position at the Mint. The following year, amidst growing pressure, he resigned. Unfortunately for our count, this particular storm did not blow over. A subsequent audit of the Mint revealed a deficit of $150,000, which Haraszthy was accused of having embezzled. First he was indicted, and then the indictment was dropped—but the US Government later hit him with a civil suit in an attempt to recoup the missing money. Haraszthy had no choice but to offer his properties as collateral, and they remained locked up in this battle until 1861. Though his name was eventually cleared, the prolonged legal ordeal stretched and imperiled the count's finances when he needed them most: during the purchase and development of Buena Vista.

A Beautiful View

Concurrent to his drama at the Mint, Haraszthy fell in love with a ranch in Sonoma Valley, which may or may not have already been named Buena Vista at the time of his acquisition. Haraszthy first visited the estate in 1855, as part of a general exploration of Sonoma during which he tasted some of the area's first wines. He was extremely encouraged by their quality and felt he had finally found a place to make his dream wine. The irony was that in this era, most of the state's viticulture was concentrated around Los Angeles. It would be several years before Northern California would overtake the south in terms of wine production. Once again, Haraszthy had positioned himself at the tip of the prospectors' pick.

Buena Vista had already passed through several hands by this point and had been under vine for some time. This made it one of Sonoma's very first vineyards, and, with 12 acres under vine at the time of purchase, it was also one of the largest. Haraszthy acquired it in December 1857 from a man named Julius Rose, but prior to his stewardship, the estate had been owned by Salvador Vallejo, brother of renowned Mexican General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. General Vallejo, whose name lives on in the form of a large if unremarkable North Bay town, famously bestowed the land grants during the 1830s and 1840s that first brought homesteaders, and therefore viticulture, to Napa and Sonoma.

With his Bay Area properties held in legal limbo, Haraszthy moved his wife and six children to the ranch and set his copious energy to the task of transforming it into a world-class wine estate. Toward this end, he hired a team of Chinese laborers to expand the vineyards significantly and dig what are now known to be California's first wine caves. One year later, Haraszthy purchased another 4,000 acres of adjacent land, thereby tripling the property's size. The result, according to historian Charles Sullivan, was that Buena Vista became "one of the largest agricultural estates in California." Indeed, by the end of 1858, it was the second largest vineyard in the state, and by far the most extensive in Northern California.

Buena Vista was not just significant in terms of size. It was also the locus of impressive technical advancements. Grapes were delivered to the top floor of the winery via steam engine, where afterwards they were processed by gravity. Another steam engine ran a complex distillery and helped to leach aggressive tannins and flavor out of redwood planks so they could be used in wine production. This technique was simultaneously pioneered by Charles Lefranc at Almaden, so history has awarded the two men a tie. Haraszthy was also a proponent of submerged cap fermentations, which would later become standard practice among California winemakers.

Fine Wine or Busted

Multiple books have been written about Count Haraszthy and his time at Buena Vista. This is not surprising, as both the man's accomplishments and his downfall make for compelling copy. But perhaps the most remarkable element of his story is that his entire Buena Vista soap opera played out in less than a decade. Agoston Haraszthy purchased Buena Vista in 1857, only to be fired in 1866. Another three years would find our protagonist dead, struck down in a manner befitting his superlative life. But while he lived, and specifically while he worked at Buena Vista, Haraszthy endeavored ceaselessly to improve the lot of the California vintner, and himself, whenever possible.

Like his contemporaries, Haraszthy was forced to rely on the dull and ubiquitous Mission variety to produce his early wines. And though his particular efforts received a fair amount of praise (his Tokaji-style dessert wine was especially revered), he believed strongly that the future of California wine depended on access to better varieties. He regularly spoke publicly on the subject, calling for the establishment of a state agricultural school years before one was founded, and even forming the Sonoma Napa Horticultural Society in 1859 in a bid to speed diversification. On his own ranch, Haraszthy planted as many of the so-called foreign varieties as he could get (these generally came from East Coast hothouses), but though vinifera, they were often better suited for use as table grapes. It was clear that extreme action was required.

In 1861, Haraszthy proposed to the State Agricultural Society that a local representative be sent to Europe to study winemaking techniques and bring vine cuttings back to California. As he almost surely intended, Haraszthy himself was promptly appointed. Within a few months, select members of the family were on their way overseas. Their first stop was New York City, where the enterprising Haraszthy finalized the contract on his book deal with Harper & Brothers, who had agreed to publish the memoir of his trip.

In reading through his book, *Grape Culture, Wines, and Wine-Making,* it quickly becomes clear that Haraszthy's extended trip across Europe was as much about pleasure as business. In the third chapter, "From Paris to Frankfort on the Maine," are such fanciful subheadings as "Ball at the Chateau des Fleurs," "The Emperor's Fête Day," and "The Illumination of Fireworks." Such dalliances were given equal page space as agricultural concerns like varietal composition, winemaking practices, and crop rotation. Haraszthy and his kin were very much living the lives thought to accompany the role of count. The problem, of course, was that Agoston had neither the heritage nor the finances to back up this lifestyle. In short, his face was writing checks that his ascot couldn't cash.

The entire voyage lasted a year and a half, with the Haraszthys spending most of their time in France and Germany, interrupted by brief forays into Italy, Spain, and a few other countries. Agoston returned to California in December of 1862 with the beginnings of a manuscript, big ideas on how to improve winemaking and viticulture in his adoptive state, and around 100,000 vine cuttings. In typical Haraszthy braggadocio, Agoston originally claimed to have imported 1,400 different varieties, but later walked this back to several hundred. Though among these imports were such key wine grapes as Nebbiolo, Sauvignon Blanc, and Pinot Noir, most of the vines were middling, in both quality and reputation. Donunrelle is a good example of this. Decidedly not among the imported varieties, despite the later claims of his son Arpad, was Zinfandel.

When the Haraszthys returned to California, they likely expected fanfare and gratitude. What they received instead were peers and officials distracted by the onset of the Civil War. Perhaps because Agoston had long-standing political ties to pro-separatist parties, his request for the compensation of some of his trip's expenses was denied. His attempt to garner government assistance in the propagation and dissemination of his collected vine material also proved fruitless. As a result, the only vineyard to benefit from Haraszthy's great European adventure, in the end, was Buena Vista.

With the dream of government assistance deferred, Haraszthy resorted to other methods to raise capital. One of his first strategies, upon which he had relied in the past, was to sell off small chunks of his vast estate. One of the recipients of such a parcel was none other than Charles Krug, best known as the founder of Napa Valley's first commercial winery. Krug and Haraszthy had a longstanding relationship. They had been neighbors in the south of San Francisco, and Haraszthy had even hooked Krug up with a job at the US Mint. Later, Krug followed the Hungarian up to Sonoma and into the wine industry, famously borrowing his small cider press to assist Napa vintners in the improvement of their wines. Though he originally purchased a slice of Buena Vista, he sold it in 1961 when the opportunity to buy in Napa—his preferred valley—presented itself.

Though selling real estate eased some financial pressure, Haraszthy also had the bold notion to make Buena Vista a public company, another of his initiatives that seems to presage Mondavi. It took a bit of political and legal arm-wrestling, but in 1863, Buena Vista estate was officially anointed as the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society (BVVS). The company was divided into shares, the sale of which provided Haraszthy with the cash necessary to implement some of the grander ideas from his tour across Europe. Even so, Agoston continued to take out personal loans on the side, amassing debt in what appears to be a wholesale faith in the future success of his nascent enterprise.

In addition to grapevines, Haraszthy had also returned in 1862 with his son Arpad, whom he had sent away to Épernay for the two years prior to study sparkling wine production. The creation of a "California Champagne" was a hot topic during these pioneering days, and Haraszthy was determined that Buena Vista be the first. He immediately installed Arpad as cellar master and demanded that sparkling wine become a part of the portfolio. Arpad set to it, and even though he didn't have much more than the Mission variety to work with during his inaugural vintage, the results were mildly successful, with a modest percentage of the wines exhibiting an acceptable mousse. Agoston used this positive outcome to seduce his new trustees and demand that Arpad increase sparkling production dramatically for the following harvest, 1863.

The result was a disaster. Despite Arpad's education and his close watch over the process (he reportedly slept in the tunnels and lit nightly fires at their entrance to encourage secondary fermentation—char marks are still visible on the roof of the caves), not a single bottle sparkled, and all 10,000 were sent to the still to become brandy. This was not just a psychological blow to the Haraszthys but also a financial blow to the now-public company, and Arpad was unceremoniously terminated. Arpad blamed his failure on the Mission variety and later got his revenge through the (albeit brief) triumph of Eclipse, one of California's first successful sparkling wines, built around shifting percentages of Zinfandel, Riesling, Colombard, Folle Blanche, Malvasia Bianca, and others. Eclipse Extra Dry, as it was known, was the toast of California for a handful of years, until the sparkling creations of Paul Masson hit the shelves and overtook Eclipse's sales.

Do Not Go Quietly

Following the Champagne setback, Agoston replaced Arpad with his older brother Attila and continued to push forward his vision. This time, the emphasis was on the vineyard. One thing Haraszthy had become certain of during his time abroad was that closer planting was key to improving wine quality. At this point in time, the standard practice in Sonoma was to plant vines eight-by-eight feet apart. Haraszthy ordered that density be increased over a rather large portion of the ranch via layering. Layering is a process of vine propagation wherein the cane of a vine is trained down to the earth and "planted." After a certain amount of time, the underground portion will set roots, at which point it can be severed from its mother vine. While certainly not uncommon at the time, it would have been considered impractical for large-scale operations. According to Sullivan, during the winter of 1864/65, Haraszthy decreed that nearly 200 acres of vines be increased from 680 to over 2,700 vines per acre. This was extremely ambitious, and it was not executed in an orderly fashion. Canes were trained in all manner of directions, with the result that it was impossible to walk through the vineyard without tripping, hopping, or hurdling over the vines.

Meanwhile, Agoston was leaving the estate for longer and longer stints. Between the layering disaster and his rampant absenteeism, the trustees lost faith. In 1866, he was accused of "extravagance and unfaithfulness" and, like his son before him, was effectively fired. He remained on the board of directors for another year before filing for personal bankruptcy. In 1868, he relocated to Nicaragua with his wife Eleanora, his father, and a few of his children. There, he continued his efforts in agriculture, developing a sugar cane plantation for rum production. At some point in 1869, he disappeared. There is no evidence to prove the cause of his death, but his final steps were traced to the banks of a river known to be inhabited by alligators. A branch leading over the water had recently broken, and legend has since ascribed its break to the weight of Agoston, who was thought to be crossing along the bough before falling into the waiting jaws of a hungry reptile.

Up in Sonoma, Agoston had been replaced. The trustees immediately ordered his mad layering scheme undone and, after a bit of personnel turnover, Buena Vista settled into something approaching normalcy. Its vineyards, increasingly diverse, were maturing, the wines were winning awards, and the trustees seemed to be happy with the financial health of the organization.

That situation degraded rapidly in the mid-1870s. Phylloxera was discovered in Sonoma and slowly chewed its way through the county's vineyards. Sonoma Valley ended up being something of a hotspot, and soon even the great Buena Vista—and all those hard-won vine cuttings—were showing signs of decline. Considering the size of the estate and the expense of a replant, the board decided to abandon ship and voted to disincorporate. They broke up the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society in 1878, and auctioned off the assets—land, equipment, inventory, all. The heart of Buena Vista, the part that contained the two old stone wineries, was purchased by a man named Robert Johnson in 1879. He kept wine production going for a while but ultimately lost interest. In 1883, the final vintage of Buena Vista's first incarnation was crushed, and the dying vines retired.

A Story Fit to Print

Robert Johnson never replanted the vineyard. The earthquake of 1906, which saw massive swaths of San Francisco burn, collapsed much of the wine tunnels. The once sprawling estate was carved into pieces and sold. New buildings were constructed, grew old, and fell. One particularly grand edifice passed through several hands before being converted into a home for wayward girls. They set it on fire. Prohibition was enacted and then repealed. And the name Buena Vista disappeared from the minds and mouths of the California wine industry.

Frank Bartholomew was a San Francisco newsman who loved his wife—so much that he bought her a 400-acre ranch in Sonoma Valley in 1941. While exploring the new property, they discovered two old stone buildings and an acre of decrepit Zinfandel. Eventually, they reached out to U.C. Davis Professor Albert Winkler, who made the connection between their new vacation property and historic Buena Vista. The Bartholomews decided to resuscitate the old estate and produce some wine. Perhaps it was Frank's newsroom training that informed their decision to revive Haraszthy's legend along with the vineyards. Whatever the motivation, Agoston Haraszthy and his wild ways were effectively born again in the press releases of the late 1940s.

The Carneros Years

Critical to the success of Buena Vista 2.0, Bartholomew made a few key connections early in the brand's development. Most important was his association with California wine legend André Tchelistcheff, who would consult on the brand for 50 years, from 1944 until his death in 1994, a period spanning three different owners and a great deal of change. At Tchelistcheff's urging, the Bartholomews planted a rather forward-looking range of varieties that included Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Riesling, Gewurztraminer, and Sylvaner. They also made good on Agoston's Champagne dreams, introducing a "Sparkling Sonoma Brut" made by that day's king of bubbles, Napa Valley's Hanns Kornell.

The Bartholomews built a solid business, producing a reported annual average of 15,000 cases that performed well in competitions. But after nearly 20 years, an aging Frank Bartholomew was ready to downsize. He sold all but the home and a part of the vineyard to Vernon Underwood of Los Angeles' Young's Market Company (today an important wine distributor) in 1968. Underwood understood the wine industry well enough to know he ought to listen to Tchelistcheff, and Tchelistcheff was very passionate about Carneros. He had recently talked the notoriously spendthrift Beaulieu Vineyards into investing heavily in the area, and Underwood followed suit, purchasing a sizable Carneros ranch and ultimately building the brand new large winery in the region, where they expanded production to around 100,000 cases a year.

In 1979, Young's Market was approached by A. Racke Co. with an offer to purchase Buena Vista. This Germany-based wine company was keen to join the wave of European producers expanding into California. The Racke group grew the brand significantly; at its height, Buena Vista had nearly 1,000 acres planted (all in Carneros) and produced nearly 300,000 cases of wine. Winemaking was overseen by Jill Davis and vineyard management by Anne Moller-Racke. These two women ushered the portfolio into the modern age, shifting the focus away from German varieties and onto Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Cabernet Sauvignon. They also renovated the old press house, which they used as a visitor center.

The size, however, proved awkward. According to Anne Moller-Racke, 300,000 cases was too big to be boutique, but too small to be a major player. As such, in 2001, the Rackes sold Buena Vista (minus a small parcel which Moller-Racke used to found her own brand, Donum) to beverage giant Allied Domecq. This was the first in a decade-long series of mergers and acquisitions in which Buena Vista changed hands five more times. Finally, in 2011, the core of the original estate—the Sonoma Valley ranch, the caves, and the two old stone winery buildings—came under the ownership of the Boisset Collection. Headed by Jean-Charles Boisset, arguably as flamboyant and irrepressible a man as Agoston Haraszthy himself, the Boisset group has worked hard to restore at least some of Buena Vista's former glory.

Life After Death

"Have you met the count?" I'm asked by Megan Long, communications director for the Boisset Collection. We round the corner of the old stone press house and head toward a tasting room stuffed with tourists.

The count is hard to miss. His tallish and somewhat stocky frame is burdened under a dark pile of clothes—a black dress shirt covered by a brocade vest and crossed by the slightly tarnished gold chain of a pocket watch. A long black overcoat forms the final layer, and a felt top hat gives the count a towering presence. Meanwhile, the bright California sun beats down around us. I ask if he is hot. "Me? Never. I wore this in Phoenix the other day and was perfectly comfortable."

The count is really George Webber, an actor that Boisset hired to lead VIP tours and occasionally work the market. He escorts me on my trek around the historic estate. When he walks, he is very much the count, gliding across the grounds with his hand resting on his stomach, as in old military portraits. Occasionally, he checks the time with a dramatic flourish or thumps his black cane along the ground. The cane's rubber tip, a modern element of grip and safety, makes a cheap-sounding bonk on the stones, temporarily breaking the spell. Similarly, the count fades in and out of character.

"1863 was a humiliating year for my son, Arpad," he exclaims at one point. And later, "I also do a mean General Vallejo."

But Webber takes his job very seriously. In addition to acting, he is an amateur historian, and his various asides really do add color to what might otherwise feel like just another winery tour. He has also learned a little Hungarian, in no small part to please the huge number of tourists they receive each year from Haraszthy's homeland. I ask him to indulge me and he spouts off a few convincing phrases, all *shh* sounds and first-syllable emphasis. "We received the Hungarian ambassador the other day," he says with pride.

Jean-Charles Boisset, a Frenchman, embraces the Hungarian connection. Not only has he imported the nation's famed dessert wine, Tokaji, to sell in the tasting room, he has also established an intern exchange program between the two wine regions. Each harvest, would-be Hungarian winemakers spend a few months in Sonoma, and Sonoma interns head to Tokaj.

Boisset is also attempting to keep the count's legacy alive in liquid form. The wines I tasted were not your normal California range. There was a Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, of course, but there was also The Aristocrat, a blend of Valdigue, Charbono, and Petite Sirah, as well as The Sheriff, a Petite Sirah-based wine that is blended with a rotating roster of Bordeaux and Rhône varieties. The names of these wines are obvious references to Haraszthy's past, but the blends themselves harken back to an earlier era of California winemaking as well, when kitchen sink

cuvees were more common than single-varietal wines. Winemaker Brian Maloney also crafts a Cream Sherry and an Angelica, two other historic types of California wine that have nearly disappeared in modern times. And, of course, because it is Buena Vista, there must be sparkling. As a nod to one of the count's more tragic obsessions, Buena Vista imports Champagne directly from France, commissions local sparkling producers to make wine under their label, and recently began producing some in house. Bubbles abound at Boisset's Buena Vista.

Buena Vista was Boisset's third historic California winery purchase, but really it was his first love. "My parents and I visited California when I was 11. Our first winery visit was Buena Vista. I adored the historic estate and, strange as it sounds, vowed to one day purchase it."

In fact, he tried to buy Buena Vista multiple times during the decade-long corporate shuffle and only succeeded in 2011. The Carneros winery and vineyards had been separated out and sold off, but the historic heart of Buena Vista finally came within his reach.

In the time since the acquisition, Boisset has poured a great deal of energy into the property. He restored and modernized the second of the two stone winery buildings in 2012, which is the only reason it survived the 2014 earthquake. And while decades of real estate deals have rendered it impossible for him to reunite the original boundaries of the property, he buys fruit from all his grower neighbors, which he views as the next best thing.

Of course, he has also worked to revive the count's sense of the dramatic. Boisset is a notoriously theatrical man, and his own personal touches are evident throughout the winery. Visitors to Raymond or DeLoach, his other two California properties, may find familiar Buena Vista's mannequin-bedecked Champagne room or the various pianos positioned throughout the cellar.

At one point in our tour, the count and I marched past a large stuffed grizzly bear, claws extended, rearing on its hind legs next to some resting casks of wine. "What's this guy's story? Did you wrestle him as well?" I asked, thinking back to Sauk City and the rumors of the strangled wolf.

"Oh that?" the count countered. "No. That has nothing to do with me. Jean-Charles is just really into taxidermy."