

## Boisset's homage to history: Wine country's showman turns tools into entertainment



Drew Kelly photos

The new Tool Museum at Buena Vista Winery displays restored vineyard implements and winemaking devices used during a bygone era of viticulture.

By Kip Davis, March 26, 2015

Few can argue that Jean-Charles Boisset is today's consummate wine country showman. Who else could make even the Raymond Vineyards dog kennel a must-see canine winery experience replete with barrel beds and cabernet-tinged water bowls? The man does have a penchant for elevating wine touring to a new level of entertainment.

So when word came that Boisset and his team had created a Wine Tools Museum at the historic Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma, the presumption was that it would be more than just a dusty display of rusty shovels and ancient wine presses. Jean-Charles did not disappoint.

Located on the third floor of the newly restored Champagne Cellar building at Buena Vista, the museum does include hundreds of restored vineyard implements and crude winemaking devices used during a bygone era of viticulture.

But the real show starts when the lights go out and visitors are treated to a 17-minute audiovisual program that adds life to the story of how these "wine tools" helped 19th-century vintners in Europe and America.

From picks and plow blades at the start to handcrafted barrel spigots at the end, visitors follow the story around the expansive room as the presentation cycles through a series of video monitors mounted amid the wine-related antiquity. Flashing colored lights and tool displays in various states of locomotion transform a mildly interesting subject into entertainment.

Adding to that entertainment, the program is theatrically narrated by George Webber, who actively personifies Buena Vista's colorful founder Count Agoston Haraszthy. Webber was tapped to embody the Count shortly after Boisset acquired the historic winery in 2011. He is frequently seen in full Count character and costume guiding visitors around the winery telling the story of how Buena Vista became California's first commercial winery. Webber's Count character, like the new Wine Tool Museum, fits well in Boisset's vision of embracing Buena Vista's history and utilizing the legacy in marketing the brand.

The relics in the Wine Tools Museum are part of a larger collection housed in Burgundy, France. Some of the pieces are from the Boisset family but most came from the collection of Philippe Bérard, who accumulated thousands of antique tools from French and other European wine regions.

The tools and machines represent state-of-the-art viticulture during the late 1800s and, although the implements originally hail entirely from Europe, the collection is representative of what was being used in California when Buena Vista was founded in 1857. Count Haraszthy, a Hungarian immigrant, was well aware of European wine technology at the time, according to Tom Blackwood, Buena Vista's general manager.

"The Count had discovered them over there (in Europe) and used these very same tools here," Blackwood said. "This is where commercial wine (in California) really began. Agoston was the first viticulturist who said 'Hey, California could be really successful and make wines as great as Europe.'"

The museum exhibit is organized in a vineyard-to-bottle progression starting with vine cultivation and displays of rustic picks, horse-drawn plows and pruning knives and shears. A grouping of giant, hypodermic-like soil injectors represents efforts to combat phylloxera in the 1870s. When those didn't work, diseased vines were yanked from the ground with a long-shafted vine puller.

In the harvesting section, charming, rather artistic wicker picking baskets from Europe are contrasted with the plain, rectangular wooden boxes used by pickers in California during that era.

The entire back wall of the museum is devoted to a relatively obscure tool used to cut and turn grape pomace as the fruit is pressed. Many of the "pomace cutters" could double as medieval executioner axes while others seem more suited for the torture chamber. Though not as historically significant as, say, the wine press itself, the menacing movement of the cutters combined with the dramatic lighting and soundtrack adds a tingle to the spine that Hitchcock would appreciate.

"When we have our distributor sales teams visit I line them up there for a picture and say 'By the way if you don't make your numbers ...'" Webber joked.

A section on barrel making covers the fine art of cooperage, a craft that seems to have changed little in the past century. Visitors are guided through the entire, labor-intensive process, from the felling of trees, the hand shaping of the staves to the final forming and toasting of the barrel. The narrative explains how Count Haraszthy, faced with a short supply of proper barrel-making oak in California, turned to the redwood forests as a source for Buena Vista's fermenting and aging tanks.

The museum's final panel displays dozens of artful barrel spigots, a far cry from the stainless steel valves and pumps used by modern-day cellar workers to move wine from one container to the next. A few of these spigots are reportedly gold plated, an apparent example of cellar bling for some of the era's more opulent wine producers.

Blackwood said that the March 24 opening of the Wine Tools Museum was the final stage in the restoration of Buena Vista's Champagne Cellar building, which was near collapse in 2011 when Boisset acquired the winery. While the building had not yet been red-tagged by Sonoma County, insurance inspectors refused to authorize the structure for public use. Though he was warned that the building was close to collapse, Boisset made a commitment to bring it back to life as a link to the winery's past.

"The first day I met Jean-Charles — April 30 in 2011 — we came here and he talked about his vision, this very vision," Blackwood said, standing outside the beautifully restored stone building. "Here we are three years later and it's finally happened. We had many challenges ... but Jean-Charles was committed to making sure this building would be open to the public again."

Instead of using more traditional earthquake retrofit techniques, Boisset and his team opted toward a less visually intrusive method. Like many stone buildings of that era, the structure has double walls. Space between the outer and inner walls was filled with debris material, which Blackwood said had virtually disappeared during the past 150 years. Crumbling mortar and other factors further compromised the structure, he said.

Turning to an innovative restoration and retrofit technique, workers strengthened the double rock walls from within by adding internal anchors and an epoxy filler. Leaving each stone in place, workers meticulously replaced the old, crumbling mortar with new material.

Completed in August 2012, the restoration project earned a design award from the California Preservation Foundation in 2013. The restored building was given its first seismic test Aug. 24, 2014, during the magnitude-6.0 earthquake centered south of Napa.

"We used a very new process — the center core process — for the earthquake retrofit and it was the first time that work was tested," Blackwood said. "This place took a hit, not as violent as it was in Napa but it was still a big shake and we just had minor cracking."

The Champagne Cellar structure is one of two historic buildings comprising Buena Vista Winery. The Press House next door serves as the winery's tasting room and gift shop. The three-story Champagne Cellar houses a wine production and barrel room on the first floor, offices on the second and the Wine Tools Museum on the third floor.

The public can visit the museum as part of a \$25 wine tasting "experience" that includes a guided tour of the historic Buena Vista property. The winery also offers a special non-wine-tasting family tour allowing kids in free when accompanied by a paying adult (\$10 each).

When he is not traveling the country as Buena Vista's brand ambassador, the Count (Webber) hosts the tour groups and adds a bit of historic flair to the presentation.

"Many people visit this winery because they have read that it's historic," Webber said, slipping out of his intentionally flamboyant Count character. "There are people who visit with their families — which is rare in wine country — because it's more than just wine."