



GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

The evolution of historic Northern California wineries
traces the region's varying fortunes

By LYDIA LEE • Photography by DREW KELLY

AT BUENA VISTA WINERY in Sonoma, California, a tall, bearded gentleman dressed in a top hat, waistcoat, and frock coat welcomes visitors. He introduces himself as Count Agoston Haraszthy, confiding that he came to Sonoma in the 1850s to make “purple gold.”

Indeed, while California became famous

for wine in the 1970s, the history of serious winemaking in Napa and Sonoma goes back more than a hundred years before, right after the Gold Rush. The area would likely have landed on the map sooner had it not been for the triple whammy of Prohibition, the Great Depression, and an infestation of vine-eating phylloxera.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The barrel aging room at The Hess Collection is more than a century old; Bo Barrett, Chateau Montelena's winemaker; the tasting room at Buena Vista Winery



Some wineries were able to scrape through Prohibition by meeting the sudden demand for sacramental wine, which was exempt from the law. Others were abandoned and became “ghost wineries.” This boom-and-bust history means that even the grandest of these early establishments have seen good times and bad.

“If you want to have a more profound understanding of what the region is about, these original buildings—from the early facilities to the showcase wineries later on—usually have a great story,” says architect Naomi Miroglio of San Francisco-based Architectural Resources Group (ARG), a firm that specializes in historic preservation.



AMONG THE COLORFUL entrepreneurs who came to this region was Haraszthy, who is considered the father of modern viticulture in California. The Hungarian aristocrat arrived in Wisconsin in 1840 and ran an early steamboat business on the Mississippi River. He then tried his hand at starting vineyards in other parts of California before settling in Sonoma in 1856.

Buena Vista was the first winery in California to be gravity-fed. This multilevel system reduces the need for mechanical elements in the winemaking process. "Historic gravity-flow wineries exemplify a unique and innovative engineering design," says Stacey De Shazo, the director of historic preservation at Napa County Landmarks. Instead of following the path of most 19th-century wineries, which were built out of wood, Haraszthy invested in a more substantial stone building at Buena Vista. It wasn't simply about how long he expected to be in business, but also a matter of efficiency: A stone building provided the perfect levels of humidity and cool temperatures for aging wine. Alas, while the Count was working on his next business venture (a sugar plantation in Nicaragua) in 1869, he fell into a river and is believed to have been killed by an alligator.

The winery operated until 1878 and eventually fell into disuse. In the 1940s, new owners started making wine at Buena Vista again, and the place was purchased in 2011 by an effusive and energetic Frenchman, Jean-Charles Boisset, who embarked on a state-of-the-art seismic upgrade and restoration. "We are here on Earth for a short period of time, but we are building Buena Vista for eternity, as is our responsibility as wine lovers," says Boisset.

A smaller winery building had already been renovated into a tasting room by the previous owners. But its three-story neighbor, which was built quickly in 1864 to handle a bumper harvest, had been closed since the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989. Ironically, years of neglect meant that the stone walls of the ground-floor wine caves hadn't been covered with spray concrete—the standard way to reinforce them. Most of the heavy timber framing, too, was original.

Boisset, who has restored a number of wineries in France, was adamant about keeping this historic fabric intact. He encouraged the restoration team, led by ARG and contractor Cello & Maudru, to pursue an unobtrusive (though expensive and time-consuming) approach. The team painstakingly replaced crumbling mortar and drilled holes inside the stone walls to invisibly reinforce them with rebar. To strengthen the timber framing, they installed hidden bolts inside the joinery.

As the 6.0 earthquake that hit Napa last year demonstrated, seismic reinforcement is critical for preservation in the region. Another historic winery, Trefethen, is

one of the most prominent examples of the destruction that can ensue; its 1886 wooden building suffered major damage. Buena Vista, though, came through unscathed.

The freshly restored building at Buena Vista is now called the Champagne Cellars, a reference to Haraszthy's son Arpad, who branched out into sparkling wine production. One of the wine caves still has blackened walls from his efforts to get temperatures high

enough for proper fermentation. The top floor, where grapes were crushed and sent down ramps to fermentation barrels below, has been turned into a museum that introduces visitors to the history, science, and art of wine-making (and is open to those not yet of drinking age).

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—JEAN-CHARLES BOISSET

OPPOSITE TOP
A wine cave in the recently restored Champagne Cellars building is used for barrel aging at Buena Vista Winery.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
An original stone winery building at Buena Vista, built in 1862, now serves as a tasting room.



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:
For an update on the earthquake-damaged historic building at Trefethen, visit PreservationNation.org/online.

IN THE ROUND

LOCATED IN SANTA ROSA, a city in Sonoma County, the DeTurk Round Barn is an excellent example of how a rustic building can also be a striking work of architecture. One of only two truly round barns in California, it has been transformed into a community event space.

The barn was built in 1891 by Isaac DeTurk, a successful vintner and aficionado of harness racing. He built the 78-foot-diameter barn next to his brick wine warehouse to stable his champion trotters, which included Anteeo, the fastest sulky racehorse of the 1885–86 season. The horses were housed in wedge-shaped stables around a central ring, with a mezzanine-level hayloft above. The municipal government acquired the building and surrounding property in 1910, and for the next several decades, it was used for storage and ad hoc offices.

By the time the city started a \$2.1 million historic rehabilitation in 2010, the barn was in a sad state. Led by local architecture firm TLCD, the project team raised the building and poured a new concrete foundation, laid a wood floor—in a pattern that shows where the stable walls once were—and augmented the wood framing with engineered lumber. They also added

baths, a catering kitchen, and an elevator. The hayloft is now an intimate gathering space and the perfect place to admire the exposed ceiling's intricate tapestry of skip sheathing.

"Seeing it go from a ramshackle, oil-stained shack to a gleaming white landmark is amazing," says Bill Montgomery, the former deputy director of parks for Santa Rosa and a local historian. "It's become the gem of the neighborhood."





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
A tasting room in Chateau Montelena's 1888 Gothic-style winery building; visitors explore The Hess Collection's gardens; the entrance to the art museum and the tasting room at The Hess Collection

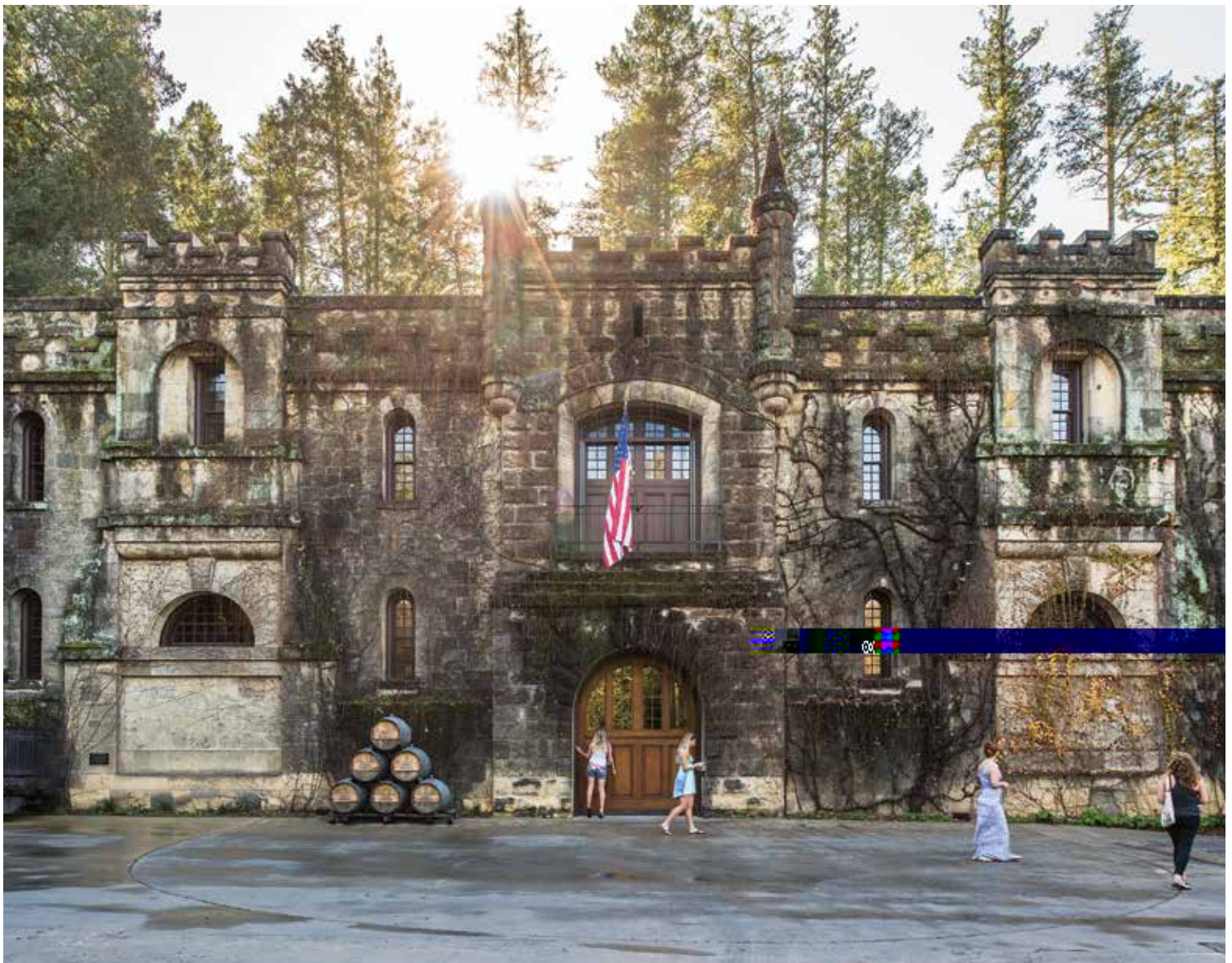
The second floor, where grape juice originally fermented in large tanks, currently houses offices. The ground floor has been brought back to its original use as a barrel aging space and also houses the glamorous new Bubble Lounge, a chandelier-lit bar for tasting sparkling wine. Even the Count has returned, in the form of that flamboyantly dressed actor who greets visitors.

GERMAN IMMIGRANTS such as Herman Hudemann were drawn to Mt. Veeder, in Napa County, because of its similarities to the Rhine and Mosel winemaking regions back home. The tough mountainside conditions and steep terrain often result in lower yields but more intense flavor. Hudemann arrived in 1876 and built a small, now-demolished winery, arboretum, and resort on his property. At the turn of the 19th century, Theodore

Gier took ownership and built a three-story, gravity-fed winery, along with a separate stone distillery.

During the Great Depression, the Christian Brothers, an organization of Catholic teachers, bought the facility for its sacramental wine business and launched a successful venture into mainstream winemaking. They joined Gier's two stone buildings together and built major additions to them in order to accommodate large-scale production.

In 1986, Swiss businessman Donald Hess took a long-term lease on the property and embarked on a \$12 million adaptive reuse and equipment upgrade. The Christian Brothers had used the distillery for preparing sweet white wine, and its walls were coated with rubber so it could be steam-cleaned and sterilized. Once the original stone was revealed beneath the rubber and a thick layer of plaster, the design team decided to repurpose it as a tasting room. "They said it was too pretty for winemaking," recalls Randle Johnson, founding winemaker for The Hess Collection.



The top two floors of the original winery building were transformed into an art museum that displays about 120 works at a time from Hess' personal collection. The open floor plan is perfectly suited to showcasing large-scale works by artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Robert Motherwell, and Anselm Kiefer. The ground level continues to serve the same function of barrel aging as it did in Gier's day.

BY THE LATE 1880s, Napa winemaking was booming, and vintners were investing in signature buildings. In 1888, Alfred L. Tubbs, who made his fortune as a San Francisco rope manufacturer, constructed a winery building that looked like a medieval castle gatehouse. His grandson would later name the northern Napa Valley winery Chateau Montelena.

The building's architect remains a mystery—there is some evidence that the design may have been imported from France—but great care was clearly taken in the construction of the two-story stone structure and its detailed facade, complete with battlement, parapet, and even faux arrow slits. "It's one of the most impressive buildings in the area, and there's nothing comparable to it," says architect Naomi Miroglio of ARG, which served as the historical consultant on the National Register-listed winery's recent renovation. "Even if it weren't associated with the wine industry, it's one of those buildings that would warrant consideration for the National Register just for its distinctive architecture."

"IT'S PART OF OUR STEWARDSHIP TO MAKE SURE THAT [THE BUILDING] KEEPS STANDING." —BO BARRETT

ABOVE
The stone used to construct the 18,000-square-foot winery building at Chateau Montelena helps maintain constant cool temperatures inside.



LEFT
Actor George Webber (left) plays the role of Count Agoston Haraszthy for visitors to Buena Vista Winery. Owner Jean-Charles Boisset (right) commissioned the award-winning restoration of the 1864 Champagne Cellars building.

RIGHT
A replica of an original wine barrel at Buena Vista, designed by Count Haraszthy

The Tubbs family held on to the property until 1958, when Chinese immigrant Yort Wing Frank purchased the winery building and 15 surrounding acres. He converted the second floor into a residence and created a landscape of ancient China, excavating an artificial lake and embellishing it with Chinese pavilions, bridges, and weeping willows. After the Barrett family bought the place in 1972 and returned it to a winery, they used part of the building's second floor as a tasting room and the ground floor for fermentation and barrel aging.

In 1976, Chateau Montelena's Chardonnay took top honors in a blind tasting, known as the Judgment of Paris, and California wines became a worldwide sensation. The 2008 movie *Bottle Shock* depicts how the scrappy American upstarts, represented by the father-and-son team of Jim and Bo Barrett at Montelena, manage to triumph over the Europeans. Interior and exterior shots of the winery were filmed on site, although all those flyover shots of the vineyards actually show some of Buena Vista's holdings.

Bo Barrett became the winemaker at Montelena in the 1980s and still runs things there today. After decades working in vintage facilities, he decided in 2011 that it

was time to rework the Gothic-style structure's ground floor for modern production. Luckily, Tubbs had built a rock-solid structure, and nothing needed to be done to the exterior walls. The concrete foundation was repoured and some of the structural timber was replaced, using what Miroglio describes as a "light touch" for a building in great condition. "It's a fantastic old building, and it's part of our

stewardship to make sure that it keeps standing," says Barrett. Today, the arched front doorway opens into a space filled with stainless steel fermentation tanks.

As with Buena Vista and The Hess Collection, Montelena's stone building has become a core part of its public identity. When people visit, they're coming not only to taste the wines, but also to experience the place itself. The history of each property becomes part

of its mystique—an element that's perhaps appreciated most by those who spend every day there. "It's nice to work in an original cellar that smells and feels like a European cellar," says Randle Johnson of Hess. "It makes you recall all the winemaking that's gone on before." **P**

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