

Sonoma Index-Tribune

George Webber, the master of middle-age reinvention

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INDEX-TRIBUNE CORRESPONDENT | April 19, 2018, 5:46PM



In his modern-day incarnation, Agoston "the Count of Buena Vista" Haraszthy is Sonoma bon vivant George Webber.

And Webber couldn't be more excited about his new children's book, "The Count of Buena Vista, the Legendary Life of Agoston Haraszthy."

Webber researched and wrote every word, using many exclamation points – because celebrating everything about Buena Vista Winery is Webber's mission. Just as it was the real Count's when he founded the winery in 1857.

The meticulously illustrated 24-page large format book begins by explaining that the Count was known as the Father of California Viticulture, and that Buena Vista was the first winery to dig wine

caves for aging and storing wine. Kids growing up in the Valley of Moon may have more vested interests in wine vernacular and history than their counterparts in, say, Iowa – so sales at Readers' Books may soar. Meanwhile, the Webber will be using the book as a marketing tool when he – aka the Count – visits restaurants, wine shops and grocery stores nationwide.

Webber is the Buena Vista brand ambassador and the book is an easy-to-read crash course about the Count and his winery, perfect reading for sales associates promoting the brand. If kids like the pretty pictures and super scary ending when the Count gets gobbled up by crocodiles, then all the better.

Webber is a performance artist who spends his days dressed in 1850s garb with his mind in the same era, impersonating the actual Count who started Buena Vista. It apparently suits him perfectly because he describes himself as “the luckiest guy in the world.”

He worked as an options trader on the floor of the Pacific Stock Exchange from 1980 until 1999, when his and many other positions were computerized. That's when he set out to “create my ideal life.”

He has loved acting ever since he was a child and became well known in Sonoma playing Gen. Vallejo, leading sought-after historical walking tours of downtown Sonoma. He also sometimes played the role of Vallejo's friend, the Count, as well as Mark Twain and “Luigi,” a singing Italian chef.

When Jean-Charles Boisset purchased Buena Vista in 2011, adding it to his extensive wine holdings in California and France, he wanted to bring the winery's history alive. When Boisset happened upon Webber outside the Basque Boulangerie and said he was looking for someone to be the Count, Webber answered, “I already am the Count,” and he has been a Buena Vista employee ever since – often leading winery tours in his official role.

For Webber, it is not really all that much of a role – as he is a firm believer in the value of history and the richness of Sonoma's history in particular.

“I think history is fascinating and wonderful and I refuse to dumb it down,” he said.

He spent years researching Sonoma and Buena Vista history and is also an expert on the Bear Flag Revolt, having written the script for and participating in the reenactment event that takes place every June.

Webber and his wife, Cathy, love living in Sonoma. “I have devoted myself to making this town be a historical destination,” Webber said, adding “And I am a master at middle-age reinvention.”

The couple have two daughters, Violet, 23, and Emily, 18, who have moved for career and college, and although they see them often they miss them immensely. It is with fond memories of animatedly reading them Dr. Seuss books that Webber – er, the Count – reads his book to kids today.

It was the Count's dream to make European-style wines in California. It's Webber's dream to make Sonoma – and Buena Vista – known and loved throughout the world.
