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BUENA VISTA'S PAST MAKES FOR AN ENTERTAINING PRESENT

It is not often you get to drink a glass of Sheriff red wine with a man who is 203 years old, but that is only one of the many unique pleasures to be found at Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma.



The man doing the pouring and drinking goes by the name of Agoston Haraszthy, or more simply, "the Count," a Hungarian immigrant who founded Buena Vista in 1857 and who served as sheriff of San Diego in pioneer days—hence, the name of the wine, a nicely balanced Bordeaux-style blend that is a top-seller at the winery and certainly the one with the most eye-catching label. The label is a gold six-pointed star like what an Old West sheriff might wear on his vest.

In fact, a few of the servers behind the bars of the busy Buena Vista tasting room are themselves wearing red vests with stars on them. The two-story tasting room is lit by a chandelier in the center and has a convivial Western saloon feel to it, with couples and even a family with a young child relaxing in chairs and small sofas in the upstairs and downstairs areas.

But back to the Count, who actually started our tasting session with a Chardonnay, named after the Count's wife Eleanora, followed by two pinots—one a 2013 private reserve Pinot Noir with an intensely cherry and even chocolate-y flavor whose grapes hail from a vineyard on Sonoma Mountain. "We're known for our pinots," he explains in a slight Hungarian accent, his voice rising as he declaims—declaiming is something the good-spirited Count is prone to do—about Buena Vista's virtues.

"No winery has our story," he says with pride. "This is the best story in the entire world of wine"—a statement that might seem like hyperbole to some, but when you've done as much as the Count has in his long, long, long life, a little hyperbole is probably warranted.



The Count is in reality a local Sonoma actor named George Webber who plays his part to the fullest. In a gray goatee and top hat with a scarf and coat and Victorian string tie in keeping with the times in which Agoston Haraszthy lived, he serves as Buena Vista's brand ambassador, flying around the country to speak at dinners and events and appearing frequently in costume at the winery.

But both Webber and his alter ego are quick to give credit to the modern hero of the Buena Vista story, Jean-Charles Boisset, the proprietor of the Boisset Collection, an international wine empire whose holdings include four vineyards in the Napa-Sonoma area—Buena Vista, Raymond, De Loach and Lyeth—and assorted more in his home country of France. Boisset and his family are natives of Burgundy and their company is the largest producer and exporter of Burgundy wines in the world.



Boisset bought Buena Vista in 2011 and set about upgrading its wine reputation that had fallen into disrepair due to years of less than caring management. He also sunk considerable sums into retrofitting the stone winery building—the first in California, along with the first hillside wine caves—to bring it up to modern earthquake standards. The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake rendered the building unusable but Boisset’s team brought it back to life, and it came through the magnitude 6.0 quake of two years ago that ruined so many buildings in downtown Napa in splendid style.

Now the old winery and caves are the sites of tours, library and barrel tastings, a champagne tasting cellar, the “Cave of Curiosities” where visitors can blend their own wine and take it home in a bottle with their picture on it, and the Wine Tool Museum, which combines an historical display of antique French winemaking tools with a video and colorful lighting effects. The courtyards outside also seem a nice spot to hang out and picnic on a sunny day.

Buena Vista’s lively contemporary take on the ancient past— its motto, seen on the sign as you enter the grounds, is “Our future is our past”—is like sweet music to a lover of history like the Count, who is now pouring the 2013 Aristocrat, an intriguing richly red-colored blend.

“Jean-Charles’ vision is to make the winery a hugely-successful, top-level winery again,” he said. “It’s a rebirth, you might say, or a re-imagining.” A rebirth, you might also say, that’s been 200 hundred years in the making.

- Kevin Nelson; Feature Contributor