

## The Calistoga Depot opens: Boisset combines food, wine and history in restored train station

From the Dig In: Feast on the latest Napa Valley food news series

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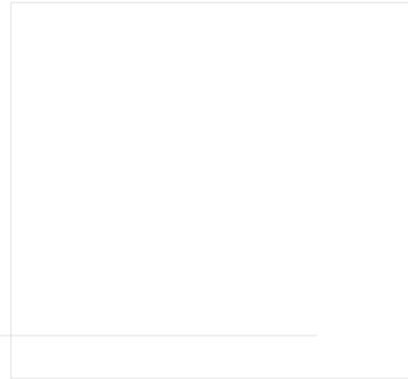
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**C**ALISTOGA — Phase one of the Calistoga Depot is now open.

Called the Calistoga Depot Provisions and owned by proprietor Jean-Charles Boisset of Boisset Collection, this newest addition to Calistoga's Main Street includes an upscale cafe, wine shop, outdoor pizza oven, and a cozy wine and beer garden, as well as an artisan grocery shop that includes everything from local olive oil and foodstuffs to flasks and T-shirts emblazoned with the company's logo.

Once the build-out is complete later this year or early next, the complex will include a microbrewery and microdistillery and six stationary renovated rail cars that will house a high-end retail shop, Earth and Sky chocolatier, an Oaxaca-influenced Mexican restaurant, a Western-styled whiskey bar with saddles for barstools, and even a swanky oyster and Champagne lounge.

"We are thrilled to be celebrating the grand opening of the Calistoga Depot," Boisset said. "We come here as stewards of history to celebrate and champion the rich past and present of Calistoga, the Napa Valley and beyond. We want people to come here to enjoy great food, wine, beer and spirits, of course, but we also want them to be reminded of just how meaningful this place was — and is — for having forged California's unique identity."



The depot was originally scheduled to open early this year, but work was slowed by supply-chain disruptions and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. When it officially opened last week, the town's mayor, Chris Canning, presided over a ribbon-cutting celebration.

"We welcome and thank Jean-Charles and his amazing team," Canning said Wednesday. "They've created an excellent complement to our downtown, and they've done it by respecting history and deploying the vision and resources to properly restore one of Calistoga's most beloved structures. In doing so they've not only provided a wonderful addition for our friends and neighbors who visit or call this place home, but also for future generations."

Listed on the **National Register of Historic Places**, the train depot was originally built in 1868 by Sam Brannan. Brannan's name and story have become synonymous with Calistoga, and rightfully so. Brannan was a larger-than-life character who put Calistoga on the map, literally.

### Sam Brannan

According to historian Kevin Starr, Brannan — a Mormon elder who would eventually be excommunicated after turning into a swashbuckling entrepreneur — first arrived in California on a ship named the Brooklyn that docked in San Francisco Bay on July 31, 1846.

Along with 224 Mormon men, women and children, he had come to procure much-needed funds for their church's westward expansion. Intending to meet up with the migrating "Mormon Battalion" — a group of more than 800 skilled craftsmen who had arrived in California earlier and found their way to Sutter's new fort on the American River — Brannan and his entire flock quickly became enamored with the region's possibilities.

Unlike Brannan, the other Mormon leaders had no interest in Northern California, seeing it as only a short stop in the church's march toward their promised homeland in Utah. However, Brannan and his cohort were finding success as craftsmen, merchants, flour-millers and as the publishers of the California Star, a San Francisco-based newspaper. And so, with ever-expanding ambitions — and amid increasing skepticism from his church — Brannan saw his success quickly expand beyond San Francisco.

Opening a provisions store near what would become Sacramento, Brannan joined forces with another adventurous spirit, John Sutter, who had built a remote fort and mill that was fast becoming a thriving trading and lumber transport hub.

Brannan's success rocketed skyward when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill on Jan. 24, 1848. One of the first to learn of the discovery, he rushed to buy up all the mining supplies in the region. Once his stores were stocked to the gills, he hurried to San Francisco, where he strolled down Montgomery Street brandishing a vial overhead and yelling that gold had been found near Sutter's Mill.

Within weeks San Francisco was left a near ghost town with every man, woman and child rushing to the Sierra Nevada mountains in search of gold. In what became the greatest mass migration in U.S. history, in only a few years California grew from roughly 20,000 non-Native American inhabitants to hundreds of thousands, each of whom needed supplies. And although the mad rush left one in 12 dead and countless people in financial ruin, the result for Brannan was to turn him into California's first millionaire.

With his newfound riches, Brannan gained a penchant for fine French Cognac and a life of luxury, so that by 1855 he had been excommunicated from the Mormon church. Undaunted, in 1859 he visited the Napa Valley, finding the hot springs in Calistoga reminiscent of geothermal spas at Saratoga Springs, New York. Always the entrepreneur, he purchased 2,000 acres of land, leasing out plots to finance the development of a resort, a Cognac distillery and a railroad train depot to welcome visitors from the Bay Area.

The much-repeated mythology — although difficult to verify — states that Calistoga was named when Brannan, inebriated during a toast to his new resort, said, "to the Calistoga of Sarafornia," having meant to say "to the Saratoga of California."

The only authoritative reference I can find to corroborate the story is found in Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Silverado Squatters," when the Scottish author writes, "... the very name, I hear, was invented at a supper party by the man who found the springs."

By 1870 Brannan's slow demise had begun. Divorced, with a string of financial challenges that included failed businesses and economic turbulence in the global economy, and a growing drinking problem, Brannon would eventually die penniless and in obscurity, but not before having helped to transform much of Northern California — and especially Calistoga — into a desirable international destination.

By the late 1800s the depot was leased to the Southern Pacific Railroad, which eventually ceased rail car service in 1929 and freight-car service in 1969. The depot went through many iterations before being bought by the Merchant family (owners of Indian Springs Resort) in 2016 before Boisset purchased the structure in 2021.

## A history 'fanatic'

"I've been a fanatic about America's history since I first visited Buena Vista Winery with my grandparents when I was 10 1/2 years old," Boisset said. "That beautiful old building reminded me of home and helped me understand just how critically important this area is to the history of American winemaking. It's something that I want to celebrate, to share."

Years earlier, in 1961, his parents, Jean-Claude and Claudine, had founded a small family winery. When he returned home to the village of Vougeot, Burgundy, France, after the first visit as a child, Boisset began dreaming.

Over the years since then, Boisset and his sister, Nathalie, have built the Boisset Collection, which today encompasses nearly 30 historic wineries throughout California and France.

Locally, their collection includes Lyeth Vineyards, DeLoach Vineyards, Raymond Vineyards and the beloved Buena Vista Winery, which he purchased in 2011. In 2021 their portfolio swelled to include Chateau Buena Vista on First Street in Napa, the Ink House Inn and the Elizabeth Spencer Winery in Rutherford, and the Calistoga Depot.

"I feel like a steward of history," Boisset said. "When people come to these places, I want them to have a fantastic time, yes, but I also want them to walk away feeling like they've been someplace that is special, one of a kind, historic, meaningful."

## The Depot

Those visiting Depot Provisions will discover that the Boisset Collection's years of experience at the Oakville Grocery stores in Oakville and Healdsburg really pay off. Not only is each item I've tasted exceptional in quality, but the management and staff are well-seasoned, experienced and

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friendly.

Breakfast is served all day and includes rich coffee and espresso drinks (ranging from \$3 to \$4.50) and savory breakfast items, such as the Calistoga breakfast sandwich (\$12) with mozzarella cheese, avocado, tomato and fried egg served on a toasted Model Bakery English muffin.

A variety of salads and sandwiches are available, but I encourage you to try the veggie sandwich (\$14) that includes tangy Romesco sauce, thin-sliced zucchini and cucumber, sprouts, leeks, basil and piquillo peppers, all drizzled with balsamic glaze and served on thick slices of chewy bread.

The succulent burger (\$16) is made with local Five Dot Ranch Angus beef, aged cheddar cheese, lettuce, tomato on a toasted bun, and the various pizzas (\$17) are each wonderful with wood-fired chard and bubbly, chewy crusts covered with ample and sumptuous toppings.

There are an outdoor patio and bar with 10 beers on draft and additional selections available in cans, two wines on draft, and eight more wines available on Napa Tech machines. There are also ciders, French-style lemonades and local Calistoga mineral water right from the tap.

“We want people to come here and soak in the history and grandeur of this beautiful place while at the same time enjoying a few of the pleasures of life,” Boisset said. “Great food, wine, beer and even the water, all in such a beautiful setting. Is there anything better?”

The Calistoga Depot is open daily from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. at 1458 Lincoln Ave.

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