

Buena Vista Winery

*From the mouths
of crocodiles*

BY JAMES KNIGHT

It was the best of times,
it was the rowdiest of
times. One thing it
wasn't was a gentler,
slower time.

Just eight years after the 1849

Gold Rush, only two years after

Bordeaux was classified in 1855, a character by the name of Agoston "Count" Haraszthy caught grape fever here in Sonoma. Haraszthy had already built a whole town in Wisconsin, wagon-trained it to California, dabbled in law, politics and business, held all manner of respectable titles and was dogged by controversy before he founded Buena Vista Winery. In the end, after his own board ousted him, the irrepressible Hungarian launched headlong into the Nicaraguan rum business, and, it's believed, accidentally into a river full of crocodiles, full stop.

Since then, Haraszthy as legend soldiered on, while ivy overtook the winery's stone walls. From 1879 to 1949, the building went disused. Since the 1920s, its grounds were home to generations of feral Angora cats, the last of which, Fluffy, passed away only months ago.

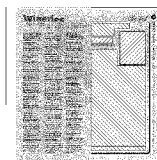
In recent decades, a succession of corporate owners kept the lights on. But now, suddenly, the ivy is gone, and the Count is back—at least as channeled by local character actor George Webber, who happened to be strolling by the Sonoma Plaza in full historical regalia when new owner Jean-Charles Boisset was brainstorming with associates on just how they might find the ideal Haraszthy impersonator to represent the winery.

Webber, who shares "Count" duties with several colleagues, is a veteran historical actor with a voice that echoes with authority during weekend tours through the restored, Tokaj-style wine caves, and he's quick with the anecdote or impromptu aside.

Inside the tasting room, a wood fire crackles before a cozy parlor area below a portrait of the Count. Hanging from the ceiling lurks a crocodile, leering with its jagged maw, safely taxidermied.

The resurrections continue on the wine list. The panoramic "Buena Vista Vinicultural Society" labels are etched with 19th-century optimism; the 2008 Karoly's Selection Zinfandel (\$N/A) a light and juicy claret style Zinfandel. The 2010 Sparkling Brut (\$38), all strawberries and cream, celebrates the expensively restored champagne cellars, while the classic Cream Sherry (\$50) is a nod to a once-popular wine country product.

This June, Buena Vista hosts a centennial reenactment of the 1863 double wedding of two Vallejo daughters with two Haraszthy sons. "Our future is our past" is the motto, brought by forward-thinking new management dedicated to taking a good look back.



**Buena Vista Winery, 18000 Old Winery Road, Sonoma. Daily,
10am-5pm. Tasting fee \$10, Saturday tour \$20. 800.926.1266.**

