

NAPA VALLEY

Old Wine Country market gets new look

By Matt Villano

One of Napa Valley's oldest and most recognizable landmarks is getting a makeover.

Oakville Grocery, on Highway 29 north of Napa, has operated as a market since the late 1800s. Visitors to Wine Country know it as the stopover for coffee, sandwiches, bottles of wine and picnic supplies on an otherwise pastoral stretch of vineyards.

In December, flamboyant winery owner Jean-Charles Boisset bought the business and surrounding property, as well as the grocery's sister business in Healdsburg (also called Oakville Grocery). Boisset also owns Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma, Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena, and JCB Tasting Salons in Yountville and Healdsburg.

Since taking over Oakville Grocery, the French-born entrepreneur has applied his signature over-the-top ethos. There's a slew of high-end, locally sourced food products, including a fridge of Tsar Nicoulai caviar. A high-tech wine preservation and dispensing machine doles out 5-ounce pours of Screaming Eagle for \$600 a pop.

"This is one of the most famous spots in the entire Napa Valley," Boisset says. "We want to make it relevant again — a place that people will come to visit and end up staying a while."

The market's place in the valley goes way back. County records indicate it

opened as P.B. O'Neil's "dry goods, groceries, and hardware store" in 1874. It burned to the ground in a fire in 1893 but was rebuilt and has operated as a country store to this day. Boisset purchased it from the family of Leslie Rudd, another high-profile vintner, who died last year, becoming the grocery's 10th owner. Rudd's family had run the store since 2007 and renovated it in 2012.

Because the grocery also was the site of the Oakville post office, it functioned as more of a gathering place than a market, says historian and author Lin Weber. "You wouldn't expect something in the middle of nowhere to be such a vestige, but it is," she says.

Today, with the fancy food and computerized wine dispensers, the small country store emits almost a Las Vegas vibe.

Boisset's version of the store is intended to be educational. He tripled the number of local wines in stock, hired a wine manager to run the program and added signs with maps and other information about each of the 16 appellations, or American Viticultural Areas (AVAs), in the Napa Valley.

Boisset plans to transform the white Victorian house to the north of the grocery into a museum of winemaking instruments and tasting room for a nascent wine brand called 1881 Napa. The museum occupies the second floor of a great room with a wrap-around balcony. One case

displays jars of soil from each of the regions in the Valley.

1881 Napa, which takes up the entire ground floor of the Victorian, will offer horizontal tastings of AVA-specific wines from the same vintage. (Tastings of four wines start at \$45.) A Boisset-ian flourish: The tasting room walls are lined with one-of-a-kind decanters from his personal collection, which he says tops 2,700 vessels.

"I've always thought decanters were a beautiful expression of how people appreciate wine," Boisset says. "That's really what this (new experience at 1881 Napa) is about: gaining a deeper and more informed appreciation for Napa Valley wine."

If you're visiting, consider stopping at the new complex for a meal. The Oakville Grocery historically served mainly salads and sandwiches. The new menu boasts wood-fired pizzas, local cheeses and salumi, and boards that combine the two. The grocery smokes its own salmon — available by the pound. The new meze plate, with three or four types of house-made hummus, is a must.

The next phase of the upgrade involves relandscaping the patio between the Victorian and the grocery to add more seating that faces picturesque views of the To Kalon

Vineyard and the Mayacamas Mountains across the street. That work is expected to be finished by mid-May; after that, the grocery will expand its hours as well.

In the meantime, 1881 Napa, named for the year the house was built, was expected to open for tastings April 15.

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Photos courtesy 1881 Napa



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