

Wine Review: Buena Vista Social Club

[These bottles were provided as samples for review purposes.]

16
08
2017

If there was a Most Interesting Man In The World designation for the history of wine, Agoston Haraszthy would be a strong contender for the crown. I had previously come across his name in a book about the pioneering contributors of the California wine industry and had assumed that he was one of many 19th-century immigrants from Europe to the United States who brought Old World wine knowledge and tradition with him to his new home and helped it propagate. And he was. But his tale was anything but rote.



Haraszthy was born in Hungary to a noble family in 1812, later becoming known by the honorifics "Count" and "Colonel" even though he was technically neither. He carved his own path throughout his life, stringing together a series of firsts that would be near-impossible to top in this day and age. He was the first Hungarian to move and settle in the United States; the founder of the oldest village in Wisconsin (and the planter of some of the first grapevines there); the first town marshal and elected sheriff of San Diego; and the founder of the first commercial winery in California (more on that in a bit). From the time he first arrived in the United States in 1840 to the time he left in 1868, he was at various times a mill owner, an author, a steamboat operator, a butcher, a member of the California State Assembly, and a gold refiner and assayer at the US Mint.

But his largest mark was left in wine, where he planted large tracts of vines near Sonoma in the 1850s, dug out the first underground stone cellars in California, and wrote the first published report on grapes and winemaking in the state, which helped prompt the governor to send him to Europe and create a further report on how best to improve California's viticultural practices. Instead of doing that, Haraszthy went about gathering up *vitis vinifera* cuttings from all across Europe like a madman, ultimately returning with over 100,000 cuttings of anywhere from 300 to 1,400 different European grape varieties. He was emphatic about California's adoption of these higher-quality varieties and helped establish research stations to advance the cause of viticulture in the United States.

Agoston Haraszthy's winery, and California's introduction to commercial wine production, was the Buena Vista Winery, established in 1857. Little did Haraszthy know when he was making history that he would only have about a decade to enjoy it. After expanding Buena Vista's vineyard holdings and incorporating a company, the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society, to manage and attract investment to the winery, Haraszthy saw his wine dreams evaporate quickly thanks to aggressive and questionable planting and financial practices that saw his investors ultimately wrest control of the venture from him. He relocated to Nicaragua in 1868 and disappeared forever a year later; the most likely cause of his death was that he was eaten by alligators. Seriously. Afterward Buena Vista weathered a bankruptcy, a phylloxera scourge, a half dozen other owners and a lengthy period in the wilderness before being acquired by Jean-Charles Boisset and the Boisset Collection in 2011. Boisset has quickly set to work trying to restore Buena Vista to its former glory, embarking in significant reconstruction of the historic stone cellars and other estate buildings, using the original winery edifice (now an official state landmark) as a tasting centre and tapping the renowned David Ramey as a consulting winemaker.



I wouldn't normally spend 600+ words leading into a packed writeup of a full six wines, but when you taste Buena Vista, you taste the reawakening of a significant amount of history, and the wines are best understood and appreciated with some understanding of their remarkable context. Plus, if you are responsible for the spread of *vinifera* plantings in California and are then eaten by alligators, I will happily devote a few paragraphs to talking about it anytime. (Worth noting: Buena Vista actually sells a wine, marked only with a large golden metal alligator and called The Revenge, for \$150 USD, "to show the passion of The Count can never be struck down". **It might be the most amazing thing I have ever seen.**) Buena Vista is widely available in the Alberta market, and I was thrilled to get the opportunity to taste through a sextet of bottles that track directly back to the commercial origins of winemaking in North America.

2015 Buena Vista North Coast Pinot Noir

"Value label Pinot Noir" is normally a death sentence, as the grape can often be a finicky all-or-nothing proposition, but this was almost the star of the entire tasting, first catching the attention with its beautiful transparent ruby-purple colour and then immediately showcasing a set of aromas that I could not help but describe as "delightful": gorgeous fresh cherry and raspberry, pine needles, fresh earth. But this is mainly a fruit-based story, juicy and lush on the tongue, yet retaining a pillowy, silky, almost floating texture, shouting out every red fruit you care to name and rounding it off with tobacco leaf, violets and baking spice. Perfectly varietally correct, impeccably balanced – one of the best sub-\$30 Pinots I've had in a while.

90 points

\$25 to \$30 CDN

2014 Buena Vista Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon

As we take yet another step up in Buena Vista's vast catalog of wines (there are over 70 distinct bottlings listed on the winery's website), we reach the Sonoma Appellation Series, whose Cabernet (actually 86% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Malbec, 2% Cabernet Franc and 1% Petit Verdot) seeks to slip into that now-rare sub-\$50 higher-end Cali Cab that is growing increasingly vacant in Alberta. It certainly asserts itself like a heavy-hitting Cali Cab, from its dense thick ruby hue to its emphatic aromas of blackberry, baker's chocolate, anise and black jujubes (there seems to be a clear red vs. black dichotomy going on with Buena Vista's red wines). There is a more serious undertone to this endeavour evident from the first moment the wine touches your lips: powerful and structured, it imposes layer upon layer of fine tannin over rich deep fruit, enveloping it in darkness, the blackcurrant drowned in charcoal, rock and ink. This could go for a long while.

90+ points

\$40 to \$45 CDN

2014 Buena Vista The Count Founder's Red Wine

Named after one of Agoston Haraszthy's not-strictly-accurate titles (that's Agoston on the label in the top pic above), The Count is a step up on the quality ladder and part of that highly-Cali set of kitchen-sink blends. It was not an easy task to determine what exactly went into this wine — its tech sheet refers only to "The Count's intriguing blend of varietals", and I must have gone to 15 different sites before finding one that would tell me anything. As far as I can tell, this is mainly a blend of Merlot, Syrah and Zinfandel, that may or may not also contain Petit Verdot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah and Malbec. Why not. It is a notably deep thick purple colour and emits correspondingly deeper, darker, denser aromas, black coffee and hot rocks, grapes and blackberries. But all that darkness comes together nicely once you take a sip and well-knit flavours of sweet-tinged currant, dark chocolate and black licorice ride much better integrated tannins into a lengthy contemplative finish. Hail to The Count.

88 points

2015 The Sheriff of Buena Vista

First of all, can we take a second to stop and applaud the sheer beauty and genius of this wine bottle? Harkening back to Agoston Haraszthy's glorious past as the first sheriff of San Diego (where he also presided over the construction of the first jail, by the way), The Sheriff of Buena Vista is a stunning visual sight, and instantly becomes THE go-to bottle for the next Calgary Stampede season. It is another everything blend: *deep breath* 31% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Petite Sirah, 14% Grenache, 14% Malbec, 10% Petit Verdot, 5% Syrah, 4% Merlot. Phew.

The Cab, Petite Sirah and Petit Verdot components help explain why it is exceedingly dark coming out of the bottle, an utterly opaque glass-coating deep ruby. Despite this visual density, The Sheriff is explosive and dynamic on the nose, unleashing a combination of grape Gatorade, smoky embers, undergrowth and fresh sidewalk. It then hits the tongue like a hand grenade, detonating with a massive rush of delicious, rich blueberry and blackberry grounded by smouldering ash and topsoil. This is at the very start of its journey but is already shooting out the lights. My hat is tipped to you, Sheriff.

92 points

\$55 to \$60 CDN