

Napa Valley Register

Kitchen Memories at Elizabeth Spencer

A new museum in a
winery in Rutherford

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Jean Charles Boisset describes meeting Kathleen Thompson Hill as a “coup de foudre” — and the result of this “bolt of lightning” encounter between a dashing Frenchman with a passion for food, wine and history, and a diminutive Sonoma collector of kitchen utensils paved the way for the creation of one of the most unusual museums in Napa Valley: “Kitchen Memories” now open at the Elizabeth Spencer Winery.

His Boisset Collection acquired the Rutherford winery in 2021, and when Boisset unveiled the renovated property in October, it was promptly clear that he had retained — but polished a little — the secret garden charm of the quiet, quirky winery, founded by Elizabeth Pressler and Spencer Graham in 1998, with its headquarters in the historic Rutherford Post Office that dates back to 1872.

The tiny brick office still welcomes guests to the winery, and inside the grounds are new tasting pavilions, along with a lush “insectarium” abloom with flowers, a French tradition, Boisset explained as he led a tour. An old garden shed has been spiffed up with bright green floral wallpaper and a selection of garden-style goods, as well as space and wines for tasting.

But the surprise came when he brought his guests to what was once a rustic tasting space that now is “Kitchen Memories” a museum filled with an eclectic, tantalizing display of just about any kitchen utensil you can imagine.

This is not the fancy stuff; here you’ll find spatulas, graters, cookie tins, waffle irons, coffee grinders, milk bottles, and whisks — all those things used in real kitchens to make not just meals, but memories. Her frying pan collection includes a Teflon pan, painted by a Sonoma artist with a portrait of President Ronald Reagan. “People told me I had to buy it,” Hill said.

“Cooking tools are essential to the kitchen, and the kitchen is not only where we gather to create the food that nourishes our bodies,” Boisset said. “We also feed our souls through the memories we make when we prepare a meal. Everyone has a kitchen memory.”

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Mobles made of sifters and egg-beaters dangle from the ceiling. Shelves are filled with toasters, pots, pans and cracker tins. Somewhere you are bound to find something from the kitchens of your childhood, your grandmother’s rolling pin, your mother’s sifter.

And this is just part of what she has collected over four decades, Hill said.

Hill, who just stepped down as food editor of *The Sonoma*

Index-Tribune earlier this year, began her collection — without realizing she was embarking on a decades’ long obsession — in the 1980s when she and her husband, Gerald, were on their honeymoon in California Gold Country.

“He was divorced so we were on a budget,” she said. “I wanted to get something for my mother, so I bought her several antique utensils I thought were wonderful. I had a limit of \$3 each.”

When her mother passed away, the utensils came back to Hill, and she kept collecting as she and her husband wrote travel guides. Items are from California and the rest of the U.S. as well as countries around the world, including France, England, Canada, Japan, the Philippines. Some pieces date back to the 1800s.

“In Europe I’d find old tins,” she said, “I’d pack them filled with my underwear to fit them in my suitcase. That’s how I got them home.”

As word spread through Sonoma about Hill’s collection, people began bringing things to her. “Someone’s mother would pass away and they’d bring me things from her kitchen — they didn’t want to give them away to just anyone.”

People traveling to clear out their parents’ homes would call her to see if she would take cherished old items; others would drive around for months with a trunk full of kitchen ware until they were able to connect with her and hand on old treasures they didn’t quite know what to do with, but felt sure they were going to a good home.

In 2013, the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art created a show of some of Hill’s extraordinary collection.

“I was impressed with the 45 books she has written,” Boisset said, “and of course, her audacious personality! I had the good fortune to visit ‘Kitchen Memories Collection’ when a portion of the Kathleen’s extensive collection was displayed at the Sonoma

Valley Museum in 2013. Kathleen personally toured me, my wife, Gina, and my parents."

Boisset decided to permanently preserve and share Hill's creation; he bought her entire collection. "I said, 'Let's make something amazing,'" Boisset said. "We are honored to be the stewards of this unprecedented collection of historical cooking tools."

The exhibit is complete with television screens showing clips from "I Love Lucy," Julia Child's cooking shows, and the Disney film "Ratatouille," the story of a rat with culinary ambitions.

Highlights of the exhibit include a collection of lithographs of Alice Louise Waters recipes from Chez Panisse restaurant featuring the artwork and calligraphy of David Lance Goines; a Toast-O-Lator (1948), a conveyor-belt toaster complete with a Spy-O-Lator window to watch your toast as it passes; and the first three American ice cream scoops.

"In the Napa Valley, food and wine is such a part of who we are," Boisset said. "The utensils that we use to create, prepare and cook are essential to our civilization. Kathleen Thompson Hill Kitchen Memories Collection is the only place in Napa Valley where you can find a range of historical utensils this large. It is the largest showcase in any California winery, and it is our honor to share this collection at Elizabeth Spencer Winery for everyone to be inspired to dream and remember their own kitchen memory."

At the opening, Boisset led guests in a rendition of one of traditions of his native Bourgogne, the famous "Ban Bourguignon" (chanson à boire) song, a good one for drinking since the lyrics consist primarily of one syllable "la," but sung with great gusto, hand-waving and clapping.

Then he led guests into the courtyard at Elizabeth Spencer, when guests dined by candlelight on a French menu that Boisset and Hill had designed together — more memories there.

One guest, Steve Sando, owner of Ranch Gordo Beans in Napa, commented, "so much of what's going on in this valley is to help people pretend they are Kardashians. I think that couldn't be more boring. This museum is real and not just family-friendly but something of substance. I really admired Kathleen and Jean Charles for doing this."

Hill also shared one of her own kitchen memories, that of finding herself cooking an impromptu meal for two culinary legends, Julia Child and M.F.K. Fisher, whom Hill became friends when Fisher moved to Sonoma, to what became her "Last House."

"I got a call from Mary Frances saying Julia was coming over; did I want to come over too," Hill said. "Yes. I was there in minutes."

The three women were discussing plans for a possible cookbook, when they realized it was time for lunch. Child proposed going to MacDonald's; Fisher said that was too far, and it fell to Hill to make lunch from what she could find in Fisher's fridge, not a whole lot, garlic, eggplant, some lettuce.

"Julia said, 'Make a salad,' and I got out the oil and vinegar but I think she could tell from the look on my face that I had no idea how to make a vinaigrette. She said, 'Try adding a little Dijon (mustard).' It turned out fine. We ate it."

"I thank Jean-Charles Boisset for making this possible," Hill said, adding an invitation to others to "join us to explore your kitchen memories and possibly share them as well. Enjoy some giggles and maybe even some nostalgic tears and have a great time."

Kitchen Memories Collection exhibit is open to visitors by appointment. Reservations can be booked on the Elizabeth Spencer website, elizabethspencerwinery.com. A hosted progressive tour begins in the 1872 brick Post Office and includes as flight of wines from winemaker Sarah Vandendriessche. (Heidi Pe-

tersen Barrett joined Elizabeth Spencer Winery as consulting winemaker, beginning with the 2022 vintage.) Tours conclude at the Kitchen Memories hall, where guests can explore on a self-guided tour using QR codes linking displays to video interviews with Hill describing the origin, use and historical relevance of each tool.

"It's something new at the historic crossroads of Rutherford," Boisset said, "the undisputed heart of Napa Valley."



ALEXANDER RUBIN PHOTOS

Jean Charles Boisset and Kathleen Thompson Hill at the new museum of Kitchen Memories at Elizabeth Spencer Winery in Rutherford.



A mobile made of egg-beaters is on display at the Kathleen Thompson Hill museum of kitchen artifacts.



ALEXANDER RUBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

Sections of the museum pay homage to Julia Child and MFK Fisher, who became friends of Kathleen Thompson Hill.



ALEXANDER RUBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

A display of biscuit tins includes ones from Europe as well as the U.S.