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Speaking of wine, family and love



Winemaker Jean-Charles Boisset in the Taste of Terroir tasting salon in Healdsburg, Calif. (HANDOUT / September 22, 2010)

France's Jean-Charles Boisset mixes the modern with tradition

Bill Daley
September 22, 2010

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Jean-Charles Boisset is the wine world equivalent of a star chef. Handsome, successful, globe-trotting and visionary — and wed third year to another wine star, Gina Gallo — he is intent on making distinctive wine at all price points. The French winemaker can be as modern as they come in his wine packaging and marketing, but he remains steadfastly traditional in his devotion to terroir, a French term that denotes an almost mystical sense of place in winemaking.

The family company was founded in France in 1961 by Boisset's father, Jean-Claude, who was just 18. In 1980, the company's

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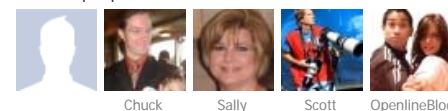
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American arm, Boisset Family Estates, was established. But the family's roots in wine run deeper; they've been in Burgundy a long time — and some of their holdings date back centuries. Their Le Clos Blanc vineyard in the Vougeot appellation is said to have been first planted in 1110.

"The heritage is enormous, powerful and even at times intimidating," Boisset wrote via e-mail. "It reminds us constantly that we must surpass ourselves every day simply to be at the same level of the history of our wineries, and we must always strive to do much better than we think we can."

We recently asked him a few questions about the business.

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Q You were a champion of biodynamic winemaking early on. What convinced you it was the right path?

A You are too kind. To say that we are champions of biodynamic farming is perhaps pretentious. We really simply view ourselves as stewards of the land, of our history and of the places that we depend upon to create true, exceptional wines.

My grandparents from very early on emphasized the importance of interaction of the sun, moon and the lunar calendar. I've always believed that the lunar calendar is a guiding principle as essential and even beyond our own calendar. It's attuned to the natural rhythms and cycles that have existed much longer than our own. Early on, I gleaned from them the understanding that a balanced, diverse ecosystem, self-contained and self-healing, is the source of the health and vitality of the vineyards.

So, there was no real moment of epiphany. It was a constant evolution since birth always being present in the vineyards and seeing nature acting and viewing its rhythms and learning to respond to nature, not to impose upon it. ... This course today guides our winemaking philosophy, which is to always look to the terroir to guide the wine; we strive for non-interventionist winemaking to yield authentic wines with a sense of place.

Q Given your strong faith in terroir, I wonder how you manage to bring your own personal stamp to wines made by/for you around the world? Is there something distinctive to a Boisset wine no matter where it comes from?

A I would emphasize that the Boisset style appears first on the farming side, with our deep commitment to sustainable, organic and biodynamic farming techniques. We believe in true, authentic wines. We always use sorting tables, emphasize long maceration, gentle press. We wish that the vineyard always should speak more than technology.

I hope that we could say that our style is soft, sophisticated, elegant. We try to make very gracious wines. We also create wines with a packaging and allure that brings people into the identity and authenticity of the wines. We attempt to do an interesting osmosis of wine content and packaging.

Ultimately, though, it is the terroir approach that gives Boisset its identity; the terroir defines who we are, and we work with it in a certain sophisticated, subdued way.

Q Congratulations on your marriage to Gina Gallo. Do you two plan to collaborate on any projects? How has Gina influenced your winemaking?

A It's an amazing feeling to be married to the love of your life, where wine and business have influence but more importantly our similar enthusiasms and curiosities for life. Our love shows you that wherever you are born in the world, similarities can happen and the differences of culture can indeed unite us. Gina is a very talented winemaker, and her influence is feminine, eloquent, charismatic and certainly romantic. I have the feeling that we were born on the same vine.

Boisset Family Estates wines

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