Recharging Raymond



Jean-Charles Boisset of the French Boisset Family Estates is the new owner of Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena.



Changes are underfoot at Raymond Vineyards, founded in 1971 by Roy Raymond, Sr. and his sons Roy and Walter. Roy Sr. was married to Martha Jane Beringer, whose family founded Beringer Vineyards in 1869. *Submitted photos*

Jean-Charles Boisset is bringing new energy to a venerable St. Helena winery

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Raymond Vineyards is one of Napa Valley's sleepers, but it's about to come to life. It was bought last year by French Boisset Family Estates, and new owner Jean-Charles Boisset declares, "We've been pregnant for nine months, but we're about to give birth."

The plans include both an upgrade of the wines and an ambitious new look to the visitors center: It's becoming a temple to biodynamic grapegrowing, a system based on what many consider to be mystical foundations.

A venerable history

Raymond also has a venerable background, at least by California standards. It was founded in 1971 by Roy Raymond, Sr. and his sons Roy and Walter.

The Raymond family arrived in Napa in 1933 and became intertwined in Napa Valley history when Roy Raymond, Sr. married Martha Jane Beringer in 1936. Her family had arrived in Napa in 1869, founding Beringer Vineyards.

Roy Raymond Sr. worked more than 35 years with the Beringers before finding a 90-acre property straddling Rutherford and St. Helena that became the heart of the company's business. The company now owns about 450 acres in St. Helena, Rutherford and the Jamieson Canyon area,

Raymond Vineyards & Cellar's first crush was in 1974 with the family working side-by-side unloading grapes with pitchforks and

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shovels. They also built the first winery building themselves.

The Raymonds sold the winery to giant brewery Kirin Holdings Co. in 1988, but were left mostly alone to manage the business. Roy Jr. and his younger brother Walter took over when their father died, and Roy retired a number of years ago. Boisset bought the winery from Kerin.

The winery was known locally as a place to find good values. It also produced excellent wines but seemed to escape the notice given to some local wineries. It wasn't seen as a destination like Mondavi or Beringer.

The location didn't help, either. It was not on busy Highway 29 but on Zinfandel Lane, not an obvious route for tourists.



Winemaker Stephanie Putnam, who previously worked at Far Niente Winery, is now working at Raymond. *Submitted photo*

Upgrading the vineyards, winery and wines

Boisset contracted with famed wine consultant Philippe Melka to help with last year's harvest, and then hired well-regarded winemaker Stephanie Putnam from Far Niente Winery.

They've started replanting some vineyards as well as converting 100 acres to biodynamic growing to start with. Boisset says he's making a big investment in the winemaking. They've acquired new equipment including sorting tables, and smaller tanks and presses for more small-lot winemaking.

"Raymond was making good and fair wines," Boisset said. "My intention is to take it to the next level ... A lot of Napa Valley wines are heavy and tannic. We want to bring in a level of elegance."

In addition to tweaking the wines, Boisset has also brought in marketing and other personnel to spruce up the brand's image. One step is new labels that return to a more elegant classic look. They've also developed some new brands including one aimed at a younger audience.

A destination center for biodynamic farming

It's in the visitor center that the most dramatic changes are occurring, however.

The passionate Boisset wants to turn the winery into a major destination where visitors can experience the new Napa — and learn about biodynamic farming. "We want to show visitors how nature affects wine," he said.

Other growers in Napa Valley follow the regimen invented by Rudolf Steiner that's supposedly based on traditional and ancient practices, but none have a visitor center advocating the practice.

It will be quite a change from Raymond's friendly, but subdued, tasting room. The charismatic Boisset, who is married to Gina Gallo of the Gallo wine empire, is introducing a garden of surrealistic sculpture including a huge array of frames so visitors can "put themselves in the theater of Napa Valley," Boisset said.

Among the additions is a circular garden planted to herbs associated with biodynamic farming as well as plantings of other favored crops like sunflowers, lavender and corn.

Boisset is also planting a demonstration garden of cover crops, as well as adding the goats, chickens, sheep and bees specified in the doctrine as well as equipment for producing the homeopathic "potions" used in vineyards.

The infamous cow horns, stuffed with manure and other materials and used to produce some of the preparations, will be buried in the middle of the herb garden, which is aligned with a round "moon" window on the main winery.

Placards will explain everything. "We want to show how nature affects wine and why the lunar calendar is important, for example," Boisset said.

Boisset is planting many trees, including a fruit orchard around the visitor center. His upgrade of the visitor facilities includes an eight-foot-high platform in a vineyard where visitors can view of the vines and the valley. Tables in the vineyards will welcome visitors to commune with the vines as they try the wines.

He's also turning a guest house into a demonstration kitchen for wine and food pairings.

Inside the tasting facilities, he's developing a wine education center including a barrel room for tasting and comparison of different Napa Valley appellations and even different oak barrels.

Boisset Wines Estates was founded by Jean-Charles' parents and is now run by his sister and him. They own about 20 wineries, including popular French Rabbit in cartons as well as more traditional wines such as Bouchard Aîné & Fils, Domaine de la Vougeraie and Jean-Claude Boisset.

They own Lyeth as well as DeLoach in Sonoma County and other brands, and operate a tasting room called Taste of Terroir in Healdsburg.

One of their new ventures is wine on "tap" from a wooden barrel containing a replaceable bladder of wine.

While Jean-Charles Boisset and his staff are bringing a new energy to Raymond, Walt Raymond is enjoying traveling; other family members remain at the winery, however.