

## Boisset an emerging wine leader

By [DAN BERGER](#)

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The old baseball saying that you can't tell the players without a scorecard truly applies to changes in the California wine industry over the last decade.

At one time not long ago, names like Robert Mondavi, Jack and Jamie Davies (Schramsberg), and Jess Jackson (Kendall-Jackson) were among the leaders in the state. With their passing, names like Bill Foley and Jean-Charles Boisset have taken their place.

Boisset in particular has become one of the most dynamic of wine personalities in recent years, and not just because the family-owned wine firm is one of the largest wine companies in Europe with numerous prestigious houses in Burgundy.

With the company's recent purchases of Raymond in the Napa Valley as well as Buena Vista and DeLoach in Sonoma County, as well as Jean-Charles' marriage to Gina Gallo of E&J Gallo, Boisset quickly becomes one of the leaders of the California industry.

As if that weren't enough, Jean-Charles and Gina (new parents of twins) just acquired the home once owned by Robert Mondavi in southern Napa Valley, firmly establishing themselves as North Coast residents.

But image-building isn't all that's taking place at the Boisset Family Estates' properties, and a visit to Raymond the other day showed just what an impact Jean-Charles intends to have on the wine world.

From all outward signs, little has changed at the property off Zinfandel Lane that was founded by the Raymond family nearly 40 years ago. The family's pictures remain on the walls of the facility.

But once visitors park, they can see what the winery calls the Theater of Nature, a self-guided garden tour that explains the biodynamic growing culture used on the estate.

Inside, the standard tasting room still exists, but various other rooms once housing business offices have been converted to 10 different wine experiences, each available for a different fee.

"You could spend the whole day at Raymond," said Boisset with a laugh. "Or you could spend just a few hours and come back to see the rest."

It all starts with a no-charge gallery for the senses, where guests can smell the various scents in wines. Among the various rooms is one where guests can blend up their own wine, and take a bottle home; another where wine-food pairings are investigated; yet another where barrel tasting is available. In one room, the only wines served are library selections from vintages past.

One special area, the Red Room, is an art-deco-designed space (with a red-velvet theme) open only to members (\$500 per year) allowing visitors a chance to play pool, chess, cards, or enjoy huge-screen TV while sipping great wines. Another room is the spectacular Baccarat room, where low lighting and carefully placed spotlights highlight the crystal.

Boisset promises more renovations at Buena Vista, one of the state's most historic properties, as well as a re-launch of the brand with some new items. "Really," he said, "it's all about fun and having a good time," he said. "Tasting wine should be about enjoyment. It shouldn't be so serious."

Some of his direct impact on the wines has come out in a new line of wines, very limited in supply, called simply JCB, with a stylish black-and-white themed label.

Boisset, an engaging and passionate wine man, is among the newest of tub thumpers for the wines of California's North Coast.

#### Wine of the Week

2009 Raymond Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, Reserve (\$16) — The aroma of this delicate white wine is more lemongrass and melon than herbs, and the fruit is fresh and lilted.

Dan Berger lives in Sonoma County, where he publishes "Vintage Experiences," a weekly wine newsletter. Write to him at [winenut@gmail.com](mailto:winenut@gmail.com).

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