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Tour de tasting room

BARCRAWLER: Three personal pours in wine country

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For establishing intimacy and focus, there's nothing like sitting down to a meal and tasting with a vintner when you want to catch a glimpse of the vision and inspiration behind their wines. I recently had the chance to do just that with several local winemakers in Napa and Sonoma — and don't worry, I took good notes.

RAYMOND VINEYARDS

The transformations at Raymond Vineyards have to be seen to be believed. Although it has been a historic St. Helena vineyard since 1970 known primarily for its cabernet, it's not the vineyard's rich heritage — or even its wines — that stand out most today: it's the changes wrought to its grounds by Boisset Family Estates, a global company with Burgundy roots that now owns the vineyard.

Delightfully eccentric Jean-Charles Boisset is the spirit behind the new era at Raymond. "I love personally the word[s] sexy and voluptuous," he tells me after we've descended into the Crystal Cellar (where cabernet tastings go for $25), a room that has been lined with steel to give the effect of being inside a wine vat. An explosion of Baccarat crystal shimmers off its walls, vats, and giant mirrors glinting around us. Encased vintage crystal decanters are inscribed with wine descriptors — in lipstick.

From the moment you glimpse the interactive art exhibits on the lawn, you know something unusual is afoot here. A "Theatre of Nature" self-guided tour of the grounds — which include a pool and midcentury house — is in the works, as is a fashion show on the Crystal Cellar's catwalk.

We were the first to taste in the vineyard's newly unveiled guest room (now available for group tastings and private parties). It housed gold and white leather couches covered in fur throws, a stuffed leopard standing guard in the corner, a dining table set with black and gold plates featuring each of the seven deadly sins (perhaps prophetically, I got "gluttony"). The pièce de résistance: a giant flat-screen rimmed in gold — of course! — playing Jackson 5 music videos.

I've never had another wine tasting experience like it. Boisset is currently working on a red room (in "all red — and velvet") and releasing two bubblies, including a rosé, to taste there this summer.

All this flair naturally leaves one wondering: are the wines any good? To put it bluntly, they can't compare to those of the previous family producers. The new Raymond is about the one-of-a-kind tasting experience.



Changing tasting for the better: Raymond Vineyards' new "interactive" art lawn

That said, Boisset's JCB wines do have their pleasures. They're playful and more balanced than many Napa wines, the No. 81 Chardonnay and No. 7 pinot noir allowing for nice acidity. He and Raymond winemaker Stephanie Putnam teamed up to make the No. 1 cabernet, which reflects both Napa and French sensibilities.

Boisset clearly leads in innovation, and he has a passion to bring California wines to the world. The man's on a mission to make wine hip, approachable, and, yes, sexy.

849 Zinfandel, St. Helena. (707) 963-3141, www.raymondvineyards.com