THE TASTING PANEL

MAY 2011 · 3.95



A Napa Valley Classic

Jean-Charles Boisset's Raymond Vineyards

Owner Jean-Charles Boisset and winemaker Stephanie Putnam in the Raymond Vineyards cellar.

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SAN FRANCISCO WORLD SPIRITS COMPETITION



Jean-Charles Boisset on his Napa property.

A Napa Valley Classic

JEAN-CHARLES BOISSET IS BULLISH ABOUT THE FUTURE OF RAYMOND VINEYARDS

by Randy Caparoso

In February of 2009, after two and a half years of negotiation, Jean-Charles Boisset, the colorful President of Boisset Family Estates, was able to add Raymond Vineyards to his international portfolio, already bulging with recent purchases of DeLoach Vineyards in Russian River Valley, Lyeth Estate in Alexander Valley and Les Clos Jordanne in Canada's Niagara appellation (in partnership with Canadian giant Vincor). Boisset's North American acquisitions added to long-standing family holdings in Burgundy, Beaujolais, the Rhône Valley and the South of France.

Although ascots and silk squares spilling from velvet coats may be part of Boisset's working attire, the evidence that this man is clearly no dilettante are everywhere: in sumptuous, unimpeachable Pinot Noir qualities found in bottlings by DeLoach or Domaine de la Vougeraie and, as we recently found, in barrel tastings of Raymond 2009 Cabernet Sauvignons, where he has already left his mark.

Evidence that this is no longer the winery of Roy Raymond Sr. or his sons, Walter and Roy Jr.—famously unassuming salts-of-the-earth who could trace their Napa Valley lineage to the late 1800s, along with familial mingling with the Beringers since 1933—was immediately gleaned upon our entrance to Raymond estate from Zinfandel Lane this past winter. First, there were over 30 acres of prime Rutherford AVA real estate fronting the winery, lying bare except for giant piles of recently torn-out vines awaiting shredders for composting—mostly Merlot and some Chardonnay, making way for Cabernet Sauvignon.

Second, while approaching the winery doors, an avant-garde sight: an ornate ten-by-eight-foot frame stripped of its canvas, leading to cookie-dough white chairs of fantastical shapes and trellised lines of more empty frames—through each, pristine glimpses of the Napa Valley floor rising up to the Mayacamas along its western flanks. After years of ownership by an international conglomerate—Kirin Brewing—the Raymonds, for their part, are elated that their namesake winery is again family-owned, by a family company that is entirely and solely invested in the wine business.

"This view from our front door—is it not surreal?" Boisset suggests, as he walks up to greet you. "Welcome to our Theater of Nature!" he exclaims sweepingly. "As you can see, we are remaking everything. Before they even enter the winery, we invite

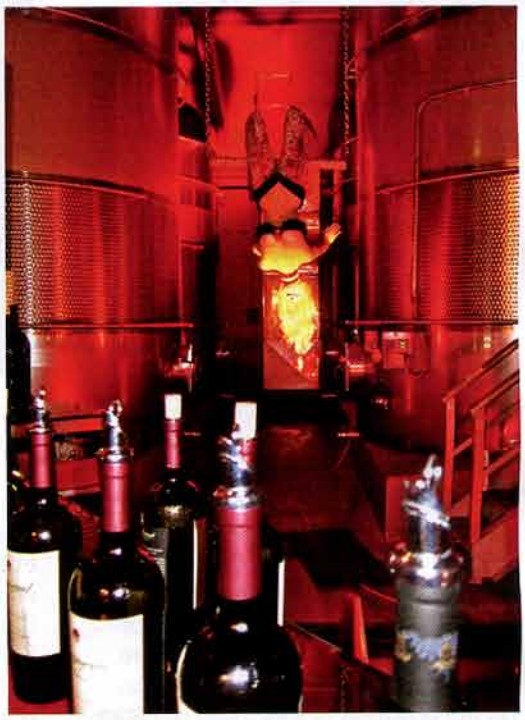


PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

Boisset has already transformed a working winery room to the right of Raymond's entrance into another kind of visitor center: nightclub-dark, lit by pink lights and more than a hundred glistening candles, pulsating contemporary music, Baccarat decanters, crystal counters, a mirrored table seating 80 and mannequins posed in approximations of performance art against a backdrop of steel fermenters, oak barrels and—lest that be forgotten—an energetic tasting room staff.

PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

visitors to walk through the blank doorway of this picture frame and take a path that will give them a different perspective of Napa Valley. Eventually, this path will take them past our vines, our gardens, an orchard of fruits from pear to pomegranate, farm animals, beehives and bat hotels. They will go from pole to pole of pleasure—finding new identities in themselves, and new tastes, smells and textures."

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"We call this our Crystal Cellar," says Boisset, "something I've always wanted to do in a winery, but could never try back home in France. The idea is to present a world of illusion, dreams and reality, where people can discover something new in themselves and become open to new sensations. They can taste from bottles or from barrels, and experience wine in a way they have never experienced it before. It may all sound crazy, but it is already working: We have doubled our sales out the door."



Raymond Winemaker Stephanie Putnam.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF RAYMOND VINEYARD

A Transformation

Therein lies the Boisset agenda: visible transformation inside and out, without disrupting the established core—a bold, imaginative enhancement of nature. Reclining in the parlor of Raymond's refurbished guesthouse, Jean-Charles shares some thoughts on the progress of this transformation, which has occupied most of his energy during the past year and a half.

"One of the ultimate dreams for us was to have a winery in Napa Valley. I had come to know the Raymonds well, and as long ago as 2004 I had suggested that we go into business together by forming our own distribution company. That did not happen, but in 2007 Roy and Walter were looking to retire and the opportunity came up to acquire the winery from Kirin, who had become the parent company when the Raymonds sold in 1989.

"Luckily, because of our friendship, we had the inside track and we were able to put the deal together for the entire estate, which included this property in Rutherford around the winery, the Stice Vineyard across the street in St. Helena [the dividing line between the Rutherford and St. Helena AVAs is at Zinfandel Lane] and vineyards in Jameson Canyon at the entrance of Napa Valley—a total of about 300 acres. That is how we became custodians of this incredible heritage, this classic all-American brand, which was started by a family who really were among the pioneers in Napa Valley.

"Although for our first crush in 2009 we had the help of Walter and his assistant winemaker Kathy George, who has stayed on with us, we also brought on Philippe Melka on September 4, 2009 because, honestly, I didn't have a clue about making Cabernet Sauvignon. Put me in a cellar full of Pinot Noir, and I can do fine. But from the beginning, it's been our goal to do something really special—to articulate a new style of Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley and take things to another level of finesse and elegance.

"In February 2010, we brought on Stephanie Putnam as our Director of Winemaking, who came to us after eight successful years as the winemaker for Far Niente. So between Stephanie and Philippe, we know we have a team who really knows how to craft Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. I strongly believe that Raymond has the potential to really stand out and do something phenomenal—especially with Cabernet Sauvignon.

"We were able to make significant

changes right away in 2009, and more drastic changes in 2010. For our Cabernet program, we began to pick vineyards by individual blocks or rows rather than altogether, which has allowed us to break things down further in the winery, fermenting in over 250 individual small lots. This gives Stephanie more components to play with in her 'spice rack,' to blend the best possible wines. We also began to send everything through the sorting table, not just grapes going into the top cuvées; we changed pump-over schedules and went completely over to French oak, moving away from the aggressive taste you get from American oak—all things that were not being done before. We cut down on production—we're now at about 160,000 cases—and we are no longer in the custom-crush business . . . just focusing on the details in our own wines.

"The other big priority since day one, of course, was to change direction in the vineyard. We have gone over completely to organic, and we are already officially 'in transition' towards Biodynamic certification with Demeter USA. The theatrical changes that you already see in the winery and visiting center are all reflections of our commitment to changing the natural part of what makes winemaking: the work in the vineyard. We are already growing things to make our own preps, planting insectories and gardens, and doing all our composting in-house. It is the process of this conversion that makes things so exciting for me, and for everyone who comes and sees.

"For the market, Stephanie, Kathy and Philippe have already done a fantastic job with the finishing of our new flagship cuvée, the 2007 Raymond Generations Cabernet Sauvignon [$85]. I have just returned from New York, where we introduced it in a big tasting, and people were raving; it is a tight yet extremely elegant wine. Krisi Raymond, a fifth-generation winemaker, was involved in the final blending of the '07 Generations. The bottle also has a completely redesigned label, which is really a flashback to the earliest labels of Raymond from the '70s: very clean and simple, carrying the original signature of Roy Sr.—a worthy tribute, I believe, to a great Napa Valley heritage!"

Tasting Notes:

Current & Future Raymond Releases

"This is just a start, and I am very bullish—very, very bullish—about the quality you can already taste in the wines. We are giving you a first glimpse of our work from 2009: Cabernet Sauvignons that are beautifully rich and deep, and also quite precise, very focused . . . sophisticated. I think we are on the right track." *—Jean-Charles Boisset*

2009 Reserve Selection Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley ($16) Bone dry, floral and lemony perfumed; tart-edged, pure melony fruit freshness.

2008 Sommelier Selection Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley ($35) For the on-premise trade only, a value cuvée blended in June 2010 from a consensus of seven of the nation's top sommeliers with winemaker Stephanie Putnam. Intense, pure, pretty cassis focus in the nose; firm, zesty length of black fruit and tobacco in a medium body, bolstered by moderate tannin.

2008 Reserve Selection Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley ($35) Cedary, mildly herbal, minty blackcurrant; tight, lean, savory medium-full bodied flavors.

2006 District Collection Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Helena ($65) "Older" Raymond style, yet rich, smoky, cedary and plummy fruit, with dense feel filled out by muscular tannin.

2007 Generations Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley ($85) Dark ruby; sweet black currant mixed with tobacco and cedar in the nose; outwardly fleshy and full, with strong core of tannin and oak.

2009 Matthes Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, St. Helena (barrel sample) Fermenting in smaller lots and extending post-fermentation maceration from two weeks to three or four weeks, according to Putnam, has resulted in "darker, bigger, bolder, yet more layered and complex wines." This component, destined for Generations, graphically shows this progression: tight, sweetly concentrated cassis fruit with cedary, toasty nuances; fairly big, hitting a "sweet spot" on palate, the fruit lavished with black licorice scrubbiness and smoky, roasting coffee-like oakiness. Excitement!

2009 Husic Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (barrel sample) From a contracted growth located above Stag's Leap; dark, saturated color; fragrant cassis notes with scrubby, weedy undertones; rich, round, smoky, fleshy yet delineated sensations on the palate. Real character.

