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Vineyard & Winery Management

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MANAGEMENT

By Tina Caputo, editor-in-chief

Jean-Charles Boisset stood high upon a catwalk above gleaming stainless steel tanks, arms extended in greeting. On either side of him were two winged female mannequins dressed in studded leather bondage gear. Down below a spectacular Baccarat chandelier cast its dancing light on the stainless-steel-covered walls and tasting bar.

"Well," he asked, "What do you think?"

It had been nearly a year since I'd visited the historic Napa Valley winery – not long after Boisset Family Estates purchased it from the Japanese brewer Kirin in late 2009. I arrived a bit early for my initial visit last February, and took the opportunity to check out the tasting room and visitor center. I hadn't expected to find it so depressing. The reception area was dark and unwelcoming, the tasting room hopelessly dated. Hadn't anything been updated since the winery's first vintage in 1974?

I was relieved, but not surprised, to learn that Boisset already had a plan for Raymond's visitor center – a grand vision that would include several different tasting areas and hospitable outdoor spaces.

By the time I returned to the winery in mid-January, Raymond was in mid-Renaissance.

The tasting room had undergone a stylish transformation and two new tasting spaces – the Crystal Cellar and the Barrel Room – had been added. Others were still in the planning stages.

The goal of the revamp, Boisset explained, is to create a "young, inspirational space full of positive energies." The old space, he joked, was more like a retirement home.

But that's not to say that Boisset is throwing tradition out the window. Rather than offering just one type of atmosphere, he wants to create several different experiences that will appeal to many types of visitors and give them reasons to come back. "In a lot of places in Napa Valley, it's about getting visitors in and out quickly," he said, "but not here. I want this to be a place to come, stay and enjoy."

When visitors enter, they're greeted at a reception desk and given a list of options for their tasting experience.

The main tasting room – to the left of the reception area – has been updated with soft white walls and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the vineyards. A long wooden table, set behind a curtain at the back of the room, can accommodate larger groups for seated tastings.

The Crystal Cellar, with its grand chandelier and risqué mannequins, was created in partnership with Baccarat Crystal. The room includes a display of Bacarrat decanters and other items, which are available for purchase. Decanters also play an important role in the Crystal Cellar's signature "Earth and Air" tasting, which explores how air affects red wines.

An intimate space within the Crystal Cellar – the Barrel Room – offers a more traditional atmosphere for vertical tastings and educational programs. A long wooden table surrounded by leather chairs can accommodate 16-18 guests for private tastings or dinners.

Prices range from $10 for a flight of white wines in the main tasting room to $25 for the Crystal Cellar decanter tasting.

Boisset is also working on additional tasting rooms, which should be completed by late summer. For example, a "Library Room" off the main tasting room will educate visitors through interactive displays and library-wine tastings about the history of Raymond and the Napa Valley.

Raymond's "Red Room" will be a plush lounge for club members. A space off the main tasting room will provide a place for kids to watch movies or play video games while their parents taste.

Also in the works is a blending room, housed in a converted laboratory space. Boisset wasn't ready to reveal the details at press time, but he said it will be different from the consumer blending programs offered at other wineries. "It's going to be very playful and very cool," he said.

Outdoor attractions will also be an important aspect of Raymond's new visitor experience.

An interactive display called "Illusion or Reality" features picture frames of different shapes and sizes so that guests can "frame" their own perfect vision of the Napa Valley.

Raymond's "Theater of Nature," located outside the main tasting room entrance, will highlight the



winery's organic and biodynamic winegrowing practices. The exhibit will feature bee-attracting plants, an insectary, and live animals including sheep, goats and chickens. Educational displays will explain how the plants and animals impact the vineyards.

An outdoor entertaining space behind the main tasting room building will include a fire pit for grilling, organic and biodynamic gardens, and an orchard with 17 types of fruit trees. Visitors will also be able to play croquet, bocce and petanque.

The idea behind all this, Boisset said, is to provide both entertainment and education.

"Most of the time what we're all trying to do is just sell wines and brands," he said. "Fine, we get it. But let's also have substance. I believe that is what we're doing at Raymond – giving people substance in the experience, in the emotion, in nature and in history."

DESIGN IN PROCESS

Along with Boisset's vision, the project has also benefitted from the skill and knowledge of an experienced architect: John Taft of Backen, Gillam & Kroeger Architects in Sausalito, Calif.

"I've driven every designer and architect crazy in my life," Boisset admitted, "because I know what I want. But John is very good at listening and giving the right advice, and helping us to avoid doing something totally stupid. He's helping us to bring rationality to things, because I can sometimes be irrational or very abstract."

For Taft, this means knowing when it's time for a reality check.

"Jean-Charles comes up with an endless stream of ideas," said Taft, who previously worked with Boisset on a project for De Loach Vineyards. "We'll help by pulling in contractors to see if an idea is financially feasible, or we'll let them know if they're not allowed to so something in Napa County."

To make room for new tasting spaces within the visitor center building, Taft and his team expanded and reconfigured one of the old winery buildings to become Boisset Family Estates' new offices.

Because the majority of Raymond's makeover has utilized the winery's existing buildings, Taft's role has mainly been as an advisor for the project. "Our role has been helping them with the big picture – letting them know what they can and can't do, getting them the permitting, creating a master plan," Taft said.

Fortunately for Boisset, Raymond's winery use permit is a generous one. "Raymond happened to have – because it came with the property – a permit that had a lot of uses that were never built or utilized," Taft said. "That's one of the benefits of some of these older winery facilities."

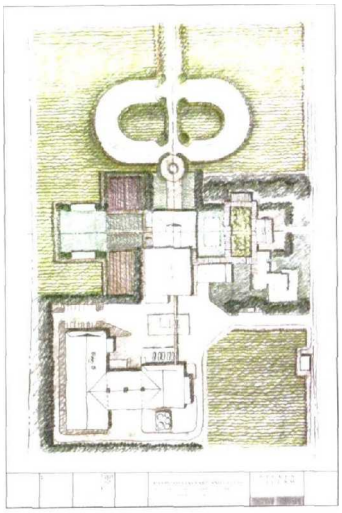
Because the upgrade at Raymond is ongoing, Boisset does not have a set budget for the work. But since most of the changes have been cosmetic, the cost has been reasonable compared to a major construction effort.

And Boisset couldn't be happier with the results thus far.

"The response has been great," he said. "For consumers, it's very strong when people see the Crystal Cellar and the modification of the tasting room, and they taste the vibrant wines."

So far, nobody has complained about Boisset taking the historic winery to modern extremes. "I believe we're the continuity of what the Raymond family has done," Boisset said, "and that we're continuing the dream of wanting to communicate our passion for wine and life." ■

Comments? Please e-mail us at feedback@vwm-online.com.



Backen, Gillam & Kroeger Architects created Raymond's site plan, and the company continues to advise Boisset on an ongoing basis.

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The Barrel Room provides a space for more traditional seated tastings.



Jean-Charles Boisset, president of Boisset Family Estates, sees the "Illusion or Reality" display as a place for visitors to "stop and reflect."



Raymond's tasting room is now bright, clean and attractive.

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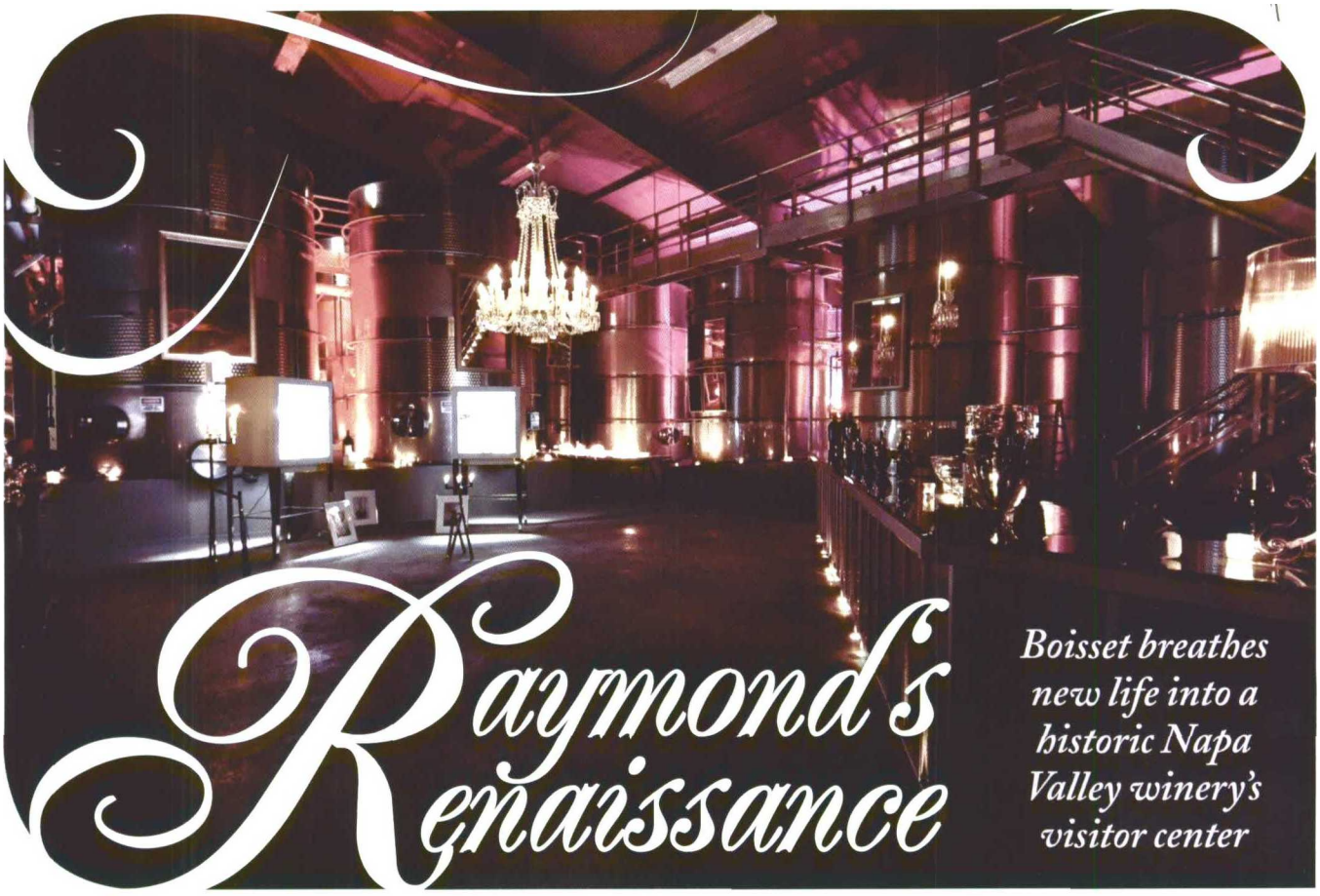
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AT A GLANCE

- When Boisset Family Estates purchased Raymond Vineyards in 2009, the company began a major revamp of the winery's visitor center.
- The project involved the creation of several new rooms for tasting, events and hospitality.
- The idea behind the revamp was to educate visitors and provide substance.
- Although most of the changes have been cosmetic, an architectural firm has played an important advisory role in the project.



Raymond's Renaissance

Boisset breathes new life into a historic Napa Valley winery's visitor center

Raymond's *avant garde* Crystal Cellar was designed to provide visitors with an exciting, inspirational tasting experience.



Raymond's old tasting room had an outdated look.