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Raymond Vineyards

By James Knight



When Burgundy wine scion Jean-Charles Boisset bought De Loach Vineyards, he scarcely added a French accent to that name. With Buena Vista in the portfolio, he only plans to restore that historic cellar. But at Raymond Vineyards, a steady Napa Cab producer since the 1970s, he's gone all-out. A cursory glance at the grounds, the glitz and the choice of activities that comprise the "Raymond Vineyards Experience" might prompt observers to confirm that old saw about Napa being a "wine Disneyland." But no, that does not quite capture it at all. This is Jean-Charles Land.

An overgrown 1950s ranch house, Raymond looks sedate enough on the outside. The grounds have been transformed into a "Theater of Nature," where visitors may tour (with the aid of an iPod app) a demonstration biodynamic garden complete with herbs, vines, compost and animals. Chickens scratch around in their coop; goats thoughtfully munch hay.

Inside, a left turn leads to the conservative main tasting room, while a right turn leads to the "Corridor of the Senses," where a "pleasure pole" represents wine textures—velvet, fur, rubber—and a series of glass pots offer up a panoply of aromas. A wine library displays past vintages; wine seminars are held in the cool, gray Rutherford Room. Further on, the members-only Red Room is a dimly lit speakeasy decked out in red velvet, with leopard-print carpet. Out back, the surreal "outdoor living room" is furnished with white, Louis XV-style chairs.

Extravagant? We're not done yet. Beyond gold curtains, the JCB Room is outfitted with gold bricks, plush sofas and vintage Playboy magazines, while a replica stuffed leopard snarls in the corner. If this seems over-the-top, our host points out the faux gold-plated lamp in the shape of an AK-47. Ah-ha moment: Boisset's personal touch is not merely lavish; there's an abundant—if unironic and exuberant—sense of humor here.

Just want to taste some Napa Cab? Welcome to the Crystal Cellar. Down a stainless-steel-sheathed hallway, the bar is located within a tank room. Lit in red and blue, with mannequins camping on the catwalks, it's a clublike scene. Chandeliers and crystal doodads abound, and "everything here," our host explains, "is for sale as well." Over there, Boisset himself, wearing his trademarked gold smoking jacket, is leading a group in a song. After that, he bounds across the room to talk with a few ladies at the bar, ending their visit with an expansive gesture of his arms, declaring, "Life is but a moment of pleasure," or words to that effect—it sounds better with a French accent.

Raymond Vineyards, 849 Zinfandel Lane, St. Helena. Daily, 10am to 4pm. Tasting fees vary. 707.963.3141.

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