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Napa's Raymond Vineyards Is Reborn

Boisset Family builds full-bore hospitality center at formerly low-key winery

by Paul Franson



Raymond's Red Room for private members features a bar, lounge, piano and player, billiards, velvet poker tables, Pac-Man, chess and pinball room.

St. Helena, Calif.—Two years after Jean-Charles Boisset of Boisset Family Estates bought Raymond Vineyards, he unveiled additions and innovations at the venerable, 275,000-case winery that Boisset hopes will transform it into one of Napa Valley's most popular destinations.

Raymond held a grand opening Wednesday night to introduce the changes to the community. Boisset's mother Claudine, and sister Nathalie, joined the crowd: Nathalie Boisset handles public relations in France.

Boisset has installed an elaborate "Theater of Nature" to demonstrate and explain grapegrowing including Biodynamic practices and converted much of the winery into an elaborate visitor center with myriad educational exhibits and programs—plus a private club for members.

He also instituted significant changes to the company's vineyards and winemaking practices.

Looking back

Raymond Vineyards was founded by descendents of the pioneering Beringer family in 1971; they built the company into a solid producer of quality wines with 300 acres of diverse Napa Valley vineyards. The winery also was noted for reasonable prices, but its management was low-key, and the company didn't receive the same attention as many others in Napa Valley.

The Raymonds sold the winery to Kirin Holdings Co. in 1988 but stayed on to manage the

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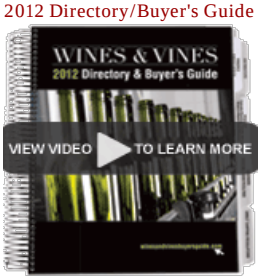
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business with apparently little interference from the corporate Japanese brewery.

Boisset, whose family has extensive holdings in Burgundy, acquired Raymond from Kirin. He also bought and upgraded Sonoma County's DeLoach Vineyards in 2004 and recently acquired the Buena Vista brand and historic winery in Sonoma, seeking to restore it to its historic stature. He operates a JCB Tasting Room in Healdsburg featuring all of his brands and has added another at Raymond.

The Theater of Nature

Visitors to Raymond will first be invited to tour The Theater of Nature, a farming demonstration showcasing the impact of compost on plants (and a compost pile), configurations of different grape varieties, herbs and fruits that express aromas and flavors associated with various wines and the impact of different cover crops. The exhibit is expansive, using land that might have grown valuable Cabernet grapes.

Demonstrations attempt to explain the principles and practices of Biodynamic farming. Chickens, friendly sheep and standoffish goats illustrate the role of animals in the farming system, rows of plants are used to produce biodynamic teas and as is a pit containing the controversial manure-filled cow's horns, plus manual mixing machines for the teas.

The area is adorned with whimsical sculpture, and a large fiberglass cow awaits decoration; the farm doesn't contain any live cattle.

The winery encourages visitors to take a glass of wine into the field while perusing the exhibits. They can also hear an audio tour on their iPhones.

The garden was designed by writer Jeff Cox and gardener Jeff Dawson, who earlier installed demonstration gardens at two noted but now-closed sites, Fetzer and Copia.

Innovative education and glitz

Inside the visitor center and winery lie a cornucopia of activities and exhibits. A concierge guides visitors to the attractions: One is a conventional tasting room, and visitors can view the usual fermentation tanks and a barrel room offering barrel tasting.

Beyond that are:

• The Crystal Room, a dramatic space filled with examples of Baccarat crystal. It's also a tasting site for the winery's high-end Generations tier and other wines served from these decanters, illustrating the impact on the wine of decanting;

• In the Blending Room, set up as a classroom and laboratory, guests can blend their own Bordeaux-variety wine from four base wines, and for $100, take a bottle home. They can also order additional bottles or cases of the blend;

• The Library Room offers sit-down vertical tastings of older wines;

• The Rutherford Room highlights Napa Valley's 15 AVAs and regions, although Raymond only grows grapes in three. The room is also used for wine and food pairings and blending lessons;

• Down one hall, beakers dispense characteristic wine aromas with the squeeze of atomizer bulbs, and examples of tactile sensations, including sharply authentic "pepper."

• A retail shop.

The education exhibits and programs were designed by wine expert and author Karen MacNeil, head of the wine center at the Culinary Institute of America.

The over-the-top crowning touch, however, is the private Red Room for club members. With its bar, lounge, piano and player, billiards, velvet poker tables, Pac-Man, chess and pinball room, visitors called it "reminiscent of Las Vegas"—or an 1890s New Orleans bordello.

Red Room memberships are $500 per year or free to any guest who spends more than $2,000 with Raymond Vineyards in one year. Members can drink and buy the exclusive $150 Raymond Red Room wine. Current Raymond Wine Club members are grandfathered in for the rest of this year.

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Outdoor shaded gardens have picnic tables; rooms for private events and the JCB Lounge with Boisset's French and Sonoma County wines complete the visitor amenities.

In the vineyard

Raymond replanted many vineyards in the last two years. Boisset brought in countryman and Bordeaux specialist Philippe Melka as a consultant, and hired Stephanie Putnam from 30,000-case Far Niente as winemaker.

Many of the improvements were available to Raymond only because of "grandfather" provisions in Napa County laws that continue "open" visitor privileges for established wineries. Raymond does require appointments for many programs, however.

Time will tell how visitors react to the more flamboyant parts of Boisset's innovation, but Raymond's educational exhibits and programs inside and out make it an attractive destination for those who want to learn more about wine and Napa Valley, not just taste wine.

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