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Dog-Friendly Napa Winery Pampers Pooch While You Drink

By Elin McCoy - Oct 21, 2012 9:01 PM PT

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Frenchie, a stubby-legged white French bulldog, lolls happily on a leopard-skin patterned carpet under a Baccarat crystal chandelier.

Handing me a glass of bubbly, his flamboyant owner, Burgundy native Jean-Charles Boisset, gets down on all fours, gives the dog a kiss, then picks him up and leads me on a tour of Frenchie's eponymous [Napa Valley](#) winery.



Jean-Charles Boisset, head of Boisset Family Estates, with his French bulldog Frenchie at Frenchie Winery. On the Raymond Vineyards estate that Boisset purchased in 2009, Frenchie Winery offers spaces where visitors' dogs can stay while the owners taste wine. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

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Dog-friendly wineries are on the rise in California. There are 96 in the Napa Valley alone, but Boisset's [Frenchie Winery](#) outdoes them all.

The idea is part of Boisset's vision for Napa's Raymond Vineyards, a winery founded in the 1970s he bought three years ago. Raymond's tasting spaces are a kind of adult wine experience playground -- a combo of Disney World, [Las Vegas](#) and tongue-in-cheek stage sets.

Boisset, 43, heads up the American arm of the Burgundy-based wine empire [Boisset, La Famille des Grands Vins](#), founded by his father in 1961. His 2009 marriage to winemaker Gina Gallo united two of the world's most powerful wine families.

Fizzing Enthusiasm

In slim black jeans, a black and white plaid Gucci jacket and black t-shirt, he fizzes with enthusiasm as he pauses to caress a visitor's hand, trade quips with his staff, check messages on his mobile.

Frenchie Winery -- the back story is that his dog has taken charge -- turns out to be a large white shed at the back of

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Frenchie Winery is dog-friendly and next to Raymond Vineyards. It offers a gated play yard, five individual kennel spaces with barrel beds and portraits of Frenchie the bulldog as various historical figures. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

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The members-only Red Room lounge at Jean-Charles Boisset's Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena, California. It boasts a Baccarat crystal chandelier, red velvet, a long shiny black bar and soft jazz in the background. Video games are in an adjacent billiards room. Source: Raymond Vineyards via Bloomberg



A painting by Carol Lew of vintner Jean-Charles Boisset's French bulldog Frenchie as Louis XIV. The original hangs at Frenchie Winery in St. Helena, California and is used as the label for the 2009 Frenchie cabernet sauvignon. Source: Frenchie Winery via Bloomberg



A painting of vintner Jean-Charles Boisset's French bulldog Frenchie as Marie Antoinette. The original hangs at Frenchie Winery in St. Helena, California and is reproduced as the label for the 2011 Frenchie chardonnay. Source: Frenchie Winery via Bloomberg

Raymond's two-acre demonstration biodynamic garden.

It boasts an enclosed play yard and five individual kennel spaces complete with luxurious wine-barrel dog beds. Above them hang paintings of Frenchie as Napoleon, Louis XIV, [George Washington](#), and even cross-dressed as Marie Antoinette.

Despite his wacky sense of fun, Boisset is a shrewd businessman: many of the U.S.'s 46 million dog owners are also wine lovers who don't want to leave their pets at home.

As a visiting couple's pink-ribboned brindle-colored French bulldog, Tilly, runs up, Frenchie does his part, greeting her with a friendly sniff and nudge.

Pup Cam

Boisset points out the webcam in the shed's ceiling, a way for owners to keep tabs on a pup while they're in Raymond's standard tasting room. "It's like daycare, it's awesome," says Elizabeth Schroeter, Tilly's co-owner.

"We treat the dogs the same as humans," Boisset replies, with a grin.

I rate Frenchie, the dog, and his winery, which has its own [website](#), a solid 95 points. His wines don't score as well, though they're better than most label-driven "lifestyle" wines.

The 2011 Frenchie [Marie Antoinette](#) chardonnay (\$18), with round, appley flavors, has a lemon-lime soda pop bite.

The 2009 Frenchie Louis XIV cabernet sauvignon (\$30) is balanced and a bit herbal, pleasant but no stunner.

Best is the 2009 Frenchie Napoleon red blend (\$30) of six varietals. It's plush-textured, with the fresh bright fruit often missing from Napa reds at this price point.

The charismatic Boisset likes to push the wine envelope. He was the first to bottle \$200 grand cru Burgundy with a screw cap, one of the first to package wine in recyclable Tetra Paks, and his most recent experiment, JCB #3, is a spicy \$123 pinot noir blend of grapes from Burgundy and Sonoma's Russian River Valley.

Emotional Visit

He thinks a winery visit "should reflect the fact that wine is about emotion, dreams, and capture the feeling inside a glass."

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An oil portrait of Jean-Charles Boisset's French bulldog, Frenchie, as Napoleon. The painting by Massachusetts artist Carol Lew hangs in the winery and is featured on the label of 2009 Frenchie Napoleon, a red blend of 6 varietals. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

So he designed Raymond's members-only Red Room with a red-velvet-heavy Moulin Rouge atmosphere that seems over-the-top for laid-back [California](#). Still, visitors ooh and ah.

"I love red," says Boisset, handing me a glass of a \$150 lush, velvety cabernet and merlot blend made to match the room.

"This wine is beyond orgasm in a bottle."

Frenchie curls up at his feet, lulled by the voice of Louis Armstrong singing "Our love is here to stay" wafting from hidden speakers.

The glitzy Crystal Cellar tasting room is hung with mirrors and scantily clad female mannequins are posed on catwalks next to shiny stainless steel wine tanks behind the bar.

Baccarat Crystal

Light pings off glass cabinets filled with Baccarat crystal decanters, part of Boisset's partnership with the luxury glass company. On another wall, a line of plaster hands hold jars filled with wine scents for visitors to inhale.

Boisset studied in the U.S., then returned to Burgundy in 1999, intent on transforming the family's negociant business into one focused more on quality and began converting vineyards to biodynamics.

In the past few years, he's snapped up a half dozen wineries in California that have historic significance. So far his best wines come from Sonoma's DeLoach Vineyards.

"I believe in destiny," he insists. "I first visited Sonoma's 19th century [Buena Vista Winery](#) with my grandparents when I was 11 years old." Late last year, he finally succeeded in buying it.

History is its marketing draw. Boisset hired a local actor to play (in costume) [Agoston Haraszthy](#), [Buena Vista's](#) Hungarian founder, who disappeared in an alligator-infested river in [Nicaragua](#) in 1869.

Boisset smiles. "I want to create tasting places where people -- and dogs -- can have a blast."

([Elin McCoy](#) writes on wine and spirits for Muse, the arts and leisure section of [Bloomberg News](#). The opinions expressed are her own.)

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