

## Napa's bulldog of a wine merchant

A man and his dog make a splash

By **ELIN MCCOY**  
Bloomberg News

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

Handing me a glass of bubbly, his flamboyant owner, Burgundy, France, 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 in St. Helena, Calif.

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 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 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.

Frenchie Winery — the back story is that his dog has taken charge — turns out to be a large white shed at the back of 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 and other historical figures.

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

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.

I rate 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.

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 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.

As for Boisset, he studied in the United States, 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 last few years he has 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 says. "I first visited Sonoma's 19th-century Buena Vista Winery with my grandparents when I was 11 years old." Late last year, he 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."



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Jean-Charles Boisset with his French bulldog, Frenchie, at Frenchie Winery, part of Raymond Vineyards in California.

