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Raymond Vineyards a feast of the senses

Carey Sweet

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In the hall gallery of senses, guests can play with perfume bottle-style sniffers showcasing the aromas often found in wines, helpfully labeled above. Photo: Scott Chebagia



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It is difficult to know where to look first at Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena.

The giant, empty picture frames and French palace-style furniture set on the front lawn, perhaps. Or maybe the big wooden cutout of a French bulldog on a white horse at the entrance to the 2-acre Theater of Nature

[Biodynamic garden](#) farther up the sidewalk.

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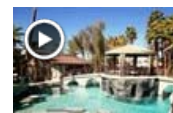
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The plain white winery building looks boring, actually. But then you get inside, welcomed by a warren of rooms in crazy decor ranging from a contemporary space featuring a cowhide tasting bar, to a dark-lit cellar room with a candelabra-strewn tasting bar, mannequins doing trapeze acts from the tank catwalks, and glittering Baccarat chandeliers.

Then, there's the salon that's plush with red velvet walls, ceiling and sofas, more chandeliers, and an oversize, gold framed portrait of a bikini-clad woman reclining on gold grapes.

The vibe: No one has ever accused Boisset Family Estates/Raymond proprietor **Jean-Charles Boisset** of being low-key, and if you don't like the Liberace-style interior design, chances are good you can at least appreciate the kitsch of it all. Staff seems in on the joke, too, showing off tchotchkes like a chrome-encased roller skate and stainless steel spit buckets that resemble expensive flower vases.

The experience: Everyone wants a memorable wine tasting, and they'll get one here. Though, in a welcome balance, tasting hosts are relaxed, whether you sip in the quieter modern room, the Crystal Cellar or the Red Room that's reserved for wine club members. They're most interested in pouring and discussing wines like professionals, and then letting guests explore the Mad Hatter spaces on their own.

But first, let the front foyer greeters walk you through the tasting options - it's helpful, as they explain what's what, like the hall gallery of senses, where guests can play with perfume bottle-style sniffers showcasing the aromas often found in wines.

The team: Boisset owns many wineries in California and France, including Buena Vista in Sonoma and DeLoach in Santa Rosa. Raymond was founded in 1970 by pioneer **Roy Raymond**, and Boisset bought the 90-acre property in 2009, plus its 200-plus acres of vineyards nearby. The winemaker is **Stephanie Putnam**, who previously worked with **Far Niente Winery** in Oakville. Naturally, the space didn't look like this originally, so Boisset added his decorator touch in 2011.

The wines: The main tasting room offers two \$20 flights of five winery-only selections or six Reserves including barrel-to-barrel wines in 3-liter boxes (\$56), while the Crystal Cellar tasting (\$30) brings four Cabernet Sauvignons (\$75-\$115) plus one Merlot (\$60). Prepare for ample pours and a wine bar boisterous mood.

The extras: As if we need more, wine club members can play billiards in the red room, plus there are private tastings available in the secret-room Library, the candlelit barrel room and intimate JCB Lounge. It's all fun, yet to disconnect from the visual overload, guests can buy a bottle of wine and chill out in the outdoor living room, surrounded by trees and diversions like bocce, pétanque, badminton, basketball and croquet.

If you go: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily. 849 Zinfandel Lane, St. Helena. (707) 963-3141. <http://raymondvineyards.com>.

Nearby: Hall Wines, 401 Saint Helena Highway S., Saint Helena, (707) 967-2626, www.hallwines.com. Whitehall Lane Winery, 1563 Saint Helena Hwy., Saint Helena, (707) 963-9454, www.whitehalllane.com. **Louis M. Martini Winery**, 254 Saint Helena Highway., Saint Helena, (707) 968-3362, www.louismartini.com.

Rating: Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Carey Sweet is a North Bay freelance writer. E-mail: travel@sfchronicle.com

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