



Napa's Most Interesting Man

A night with the guy who throws wine country's best parties (and makes some pretty good vino to boot)

By dusk on that chilly February night, my teeth had been stained crimson by the juice of so, so many glasses of Napa cabernet sauvignon. I had been sipping, swishing and spitting wine since dawn as part of Napa Valley Vintner's

annual “Premiere Napa Valley,” a weekend-long pilgrimage made by critics, collectors, restauranters, sommeliers, journalists and others obsessed with the purple fairy to America’s most renowned wine region. The value of the liquid I had expelled forcefully from my mouth was incalculable; a good portion of it was specially made to be auctioned off to the highest bidder, which typically goes for thousands of dollars for the privilege of owning an exclusive barrel of your own Napa wine. To gin up excitement for the auction, and give media and trade a preview of their current and future releases, vintners hold open houses for those who touch the industry in some way. As a reporter at Bloomberg News who wrote about wine as much as I was allowed, I made sure to secure my golden ticket for the festivities.

Raymond Vineyards was one of the last stops on my schedule that year, one of which I was inclined to skip because, to be frank, the brand didn’t seem that exciting to me. At the time, I had little experience with them and instead had plotted my day around visiting the cult wineries or those hosting numerous others in their caves or facilities, the better to taste as many wineries as possible. Still, I knew and respected one of the media people working on Raymond’s behalf, and I promised her I’d swing by. I also wanted to meet the man behind the rumors, Jean-Charles

Boisset.

People who know the wine industry are already smiling, because the exploits of “JCB” are well known. Or at least the legend of JCB is well known. The Frenchman from a prominent Burgundian-land holding family, he came to America, married Gina Gallo (yes that Gallo) and acquired some of the most recognized wine labels in the U.S., including DeLoach Vineyards, Buena Vista Winery and Raymond. The couple have been featured in numerous glossy magazine spreads, throw lavish parties at their wineries and aren't afraid to stand out, stylistically. They even bought Robert Mondavi's old house, a 11,500 square-foot abode with a pool in the living room.

The rumors in particular – or should I say rumors of rumors – were everywhere. Wine industry folk would often say stuff like “Oh, the stories I've heard!” or “I could never repeat the things I've been told,” without ever actually saying anything. This was catnip to a journalist, and of course my imagination ran wild. What could it possibly be, I wondered, that have all these folks in a tizzy? The way they talked about him made him seem to be a real life “Great Gatsby.” However, despite much prodding, I never really heard anything of substance. It's not hard to see why people let themselves believe whatever it is they hear – JCB lives a fabulous life in an area that despite all its wealth and

prestige, is still a countrified farming town at its core.



Gina Gallo and Jean-Charles Boisset bathing in sparkling wine bottles

When our small party arrived at Raymond Vineyards late on this particular day several years ago, most of the tasters had moved on to other events. Yet what we found inside the winery was very different than pretty much every other winery in Napa. On the outside, Raymond Vineyards, which had its first crush in 1974, looks like a big white barn. The property is tucked away off zinfandel lane, set back from highway 29 in between Rutherford and St. Helena. It's easy to miss from the main road – I've driven by it even when I was specifically looking for it. But once you get inside you start to get sense things are different here.

As you step in, there is a dark, narrow hallway that leads to the main tasting room and production floor. What you see is simply ridiculous, by Napa standards. Purple flood lights and disco balls paint the room with color and bursts of sparkle, and in the dim, you see bikini-clad mannequins hanging upside down from trapezes suspended from the ceiling. Baccarat crystal decanters, glasses and a chandelier adorn the room like jewelry. It's what Willy Wonka would have devised, had his passion been wine and not candy.

The wines laid out for us to taste were a nice spread of select vintages going back to the early 1980s. Some were wonderfully aged, others were showing their age. There were also barrel samples from the current vintage that displayed the density and intensity that is common for high end Napa vino nowadays. The more recent vintages and easier to find bottles showcased area-textbook flavors — the chardonnay showing balance between tropical fruit and a hint of oak, the merlot highlighting black plums and cassis, and the cabernet giving great structure and a mouthful of dark berry flavors. After talking to the winemaker, Stephanie Putnam, a firecracker of a woman whose passion for her job shines through in every conversation I've had with her, Jean-Charles sashayed into the room. Wearing a dress shirt open one button past what you normally see, his neck swathed in a silk scarf, he introduced himself in that friendly, I-know-who-you-are kind of way that makes you

wonder if indeed they know you.

“Hi, I’m Jean-Charles,” he said. “Welcome to my winery.”

We started to talk wine, and it became apparent after chatting for a while that we seemed to have a similar outlook on several aspects of the industry and business in general. What drew my attention, and later my respect, was what he had done and intended to do with the wineries he acquired. As someone who wrote about mergers and acquisitions across several industries for years, I know how deals can lead to decline. One company sees another company with a great brand and acquires it, but ends up ruining it because of cost-cutting, internal bureaucracy or talent-drain; or the acquirer sees a company in distress and buys it to squeeze any remaining profit out of it while there’s still life in it. The wine world in particular has seen once lofty brands ground into cheap swill you wouldn’t even want to cook with, thanks to acquisitions by bigger brands hoping to cash in on a label’s cache.





But JCB talked differently about his plans. He spoke reverentially about the wineries he was acquiring, going over their histories, his love of their stories and where they fit into the current market. He seemed genuinely excited to spend massive amounts of money to restore what value these wineries had once possessed and bring their operations up to modern day standards. As a journalist, I am wary of such talk, because you hear it often as lip service. But for JCB, he has backed up his proclamations with actions.

Raymond itself, the jewel in his American winery crown, required a costly replanting of its vines, a prospect that scared away at least one other potential buyer I had spoken with about the deal. Buena Vista also got a makeover that included a restoration of its cellars with seismic retrofitting, at no small cost. DeLoach, a pinot house from Sonoma that the Boisset family purchased in 2003,

underwent a replanting and relies on biodynamic farming as well as winemaking techniques that eschew the easy and predictable in favor of more labor-intensive work to produce what they believe is better wine.

Dumping money into winery showrooms and facilities is one thing, but what about the wines themselves? What JCB has done very well is carve out a niche for creating good wines at reasonable prices, from regions you don't expect to find such deals. I've had extraordinary wines from Napa — 100-point Robert Parker wines, wines made exclusively for auctions that sold for tens of thousands of dollars, wines decades old, stored away in private cellars. While each sip is an amazing experience, they're not wines I'm likely to ever try again. I'm simply not rich enough.

The territory between \$15 and \$50 is a mixed bag. I've had some decent cheap wines, but not very often. I've had so-so bottles that cost a lot and felt disappointed. You can find nice bottles around \$50 (see my review [here](#)) but that likely isn't a price you're going to spend for midweek drinking. JCB's wines — the ones you can find in the supermarket — are both high quality and affordable — and from Napa. That's rare.

Back at Raymond, on that first night I met JCB, the evening

really got interesting when he asked me if I would like to see the pool house.

It seemed like an odd request, but he was very excited about showing it — almost too excited. We were drinking in a winery wonderland, what could be in the pool house that was more exciting than this, I wondered.

So off into the dark we went, back behind the barn, through a little garden. On our way there we passed a BBQ pit — converted from a hot tub, he tells us — and to the pool, glowing with a blue, rippling light in the night. We pause here and JCB tells me he'd love to have a large crystal statue placed in the middle of the pool. I can't tell if he's joking or serious, but nonetheless, he's certainly enjoying himself. And then, there was the pool house. It looked like a 60s mod building, a single-story, white rectangle box with sliding glass doors. It wouldn't be out of place in an episode of Mad Men.

JCB approached the entrance, which was concealed by what looked like gold velvet curtains across the entire front, and with a devilish smile, said, "you're going to love this!" and opened the doors.

What lay inside looked like the scene of a David Lynch movie scene. The room itself was minimalistic, mid-century modern space age stark, with certain flairs. On one side, a

large white marble dining table with clear acrylic chairs; in the middle, a movie projector casting Michael Jackson's "Thriller" on the wall; and on a metallic gold couch sat men in suits playing Nintendo Wii.



After soaking it all in, we sat at the table to taste some additional wines and listen to JCB regale us with his life story, his passions and plans for the future. I was kicking myself for not having a tape recorder handy, because everything he was saying would have been a perfect lead for a feature. He told us about the first time he tried wine — as a young teenager sneaking sips from leftover glasses his parents and their friends never finished during a dinner party, and the subsequent headache the next day; he told us about how magical it felt during his first visit to the US,

stopping by Buena Vista, the California winery that has been in operation the longest, and how he thought at the time he wanted to own that place; he talked about how much he loved the history behind Raymond, and the significant investment he made to replant the vineyards and modernize the property. He talked about the “red room” a members-only area with red velvet walls, red carpet, red furniture, a red felt pool table, 1980s arcade games, and of course, a wine tasting bar. He even had plans to open a tasting room where dog lovers could bring their pups and enjoy a special brand.

In between these stories he would bring out new, unreleased wines that, he claimed, no one outside the company had tasted. There was his idea to brand wines like Chanel perfume — his No. 1 Pinot; the No. 22 sparkling wine. We also drank vodka made from Burgundian grapes he poured into Baccarat crystal shot glasses.





I, and my companions, felt like we were in one of those “World’s Most Interesting Man” commercials. It was different than any other event I have ever been to, before or since. We didn’t want to leave, but as the hours passed, we knew we must. We eventually departed, headed out to one more stop — a dive bar where a band comprised from some of Napa’s top winemakers were closing out the night as their bottles were being poured.

But for me, those few hours at Raymond, talking to JCB about wine and life, was without a doubt one of the most surreal, thrilling and just all around fun nights I’ve had in Napa. I still talk about it years later. If you have a chance to attend any of his parties, or even visit the winery, it will likely be one of the most unique experiences you can possibly have in wine country. Oh, and the wine is pretty good too.

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