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A Sparkling Imagination: Jean-Charles Boisset



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Photography Brad Mollath



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If you've ever dreamed of bathing in a tub of sparkling wine, then you're in luck: Jean-Charles Boisset is about to make your fantasy a reality. This unusual experience is, in fact, newly on the menu at Raymond Vineyards thanks to the rich fantasy life of the Boisset Family Estates proprietor. He wanted wine lovers to be able to "live the vineyard and experience nature in the middle of the valley." Says the fabulous and flamboyant Boisset, "I created the perfect recipe for the bubble bath – two cases of JCB 69 and two equivalent cases of warm water. We had so much fun, so I thought we should do more bubble baths. It's exciting, original and great for your skin." The bubbly bathing experience, which makes its debut this summer, "is all about the intimacy of people together and being able to experience greatness in the middle of the vineyard." He adds, "Life is a magical place. We're lucky enough that we can execute the ideas that we come up with."

This isn't the first example of Boisset's imagination running wild. The Burgundy-born vintner is becoming known for the fantastical experiences that he brings to the 22 wineries he owns in France and California. Other unique enterprises include a pairing of wine and music at the JCB Lounge in Napa Valley, a museum of historical wine tools at Buena Vista Winery, culinary demonstrations in the middle of a Gaggenau mobile kitchen at Raymond Winery and a mustard-making experience in the garden at De Loach Vineyards. His flair for the theatrical is also evident in his fashion sense. On any given day, he can be found clad head-to-toe in designer suits or tuxedos from Gucci, Tom Ford, or Lanvin in eye-popping, candy-colored shades of maroon, royal blue and pink. He also admits to a fondness for the "unpredictable style" of a Louboutin shoe.



It's no wonder that Boisset likens his company to a "fashion house" of wineries akin to Gucci or LVMH. As proprietor of his family-run business, he has the pleasure of not only directing winemakers, but also creating unique styles of wine. "We have many different wineries that we wanted to buy for all kinds of reasons, and we have the opportunities to build them the way I want," he says.

Of Boisset's five California wineries – Raymond Vineyards, Buena Vista Winery, De Loach Vineyards, Lyeth Estate and Lockwood Vineyard – Raymond is most reminiscent of an adult's playground, where guests can enjoy seven radically different experiences. Inside the awe-inspiring Crystal Cellar, patrons are surrounded by opulence. There are the reflections of stainless steel mirrors, Baccarat crystal, Christofle silver and, quite uniquely, scantily clad mannequins hanging from trapezes. Just around the corner is the seductive "red room", which invokes old-world elegance with its red velvet furnishings and crystal chandeliers. There is even a place for dogs at Raymond, as the outdoor Frenchie winery was built with the belief that animals also deserve to enjoy a beautiful tasting room just as humans do.

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- Table of Contents
- Features
- The Scene
- Haute 100
- Top 5
- Haute Autos
- View Flipbook

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The 44-year old certainly wants his wine-tasting experience to be anything but traditional, just as he himself is anything but. Yet, however fun he makes it, the world of wine is not a lighthearted matter to Boisset. He admits that he expects a lot, and in return, receives the best from his 650 employees.

He is equally as serious about implementing organic and biodynamic farming and sustainable practices across all 22 of his wineries. Making a significant impact is important to Boisset, especially because he was born into a family of winemakers. "I believe in family business and multi-generational visions. We act in life for a purpose; we want them to live forever. All the things I do, I would want to keep them forever. It's like a Picasso painting – some of the wineries we have are second to none," he declares.

Photography Timothy Shonnard



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- Haute Event: Roger Vivier Children's Hospital Luncheon in Bal Harbour**

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-  **Luxury Car Transportation**
-  **Private Airports**
-  **Where to Drink**
-  **Where to Eat at Daytime**
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Boisset hails from a family that is now the third leading winemaker in France. His parents, Jean-Claude and Claudine, founded the family winery in 1961. It's no wonder Boisset maintains that he was born "with wine in his blood." He says, "It was part of me. My parents never told me that I had to do this. I just went into it very smoothly. Wine is a catalyst to express myself in many directions."

It's true that Boisset has been extremely successful since branching out on his own in California with the 2003 purchase of DeLoach Vineyards, the first of his five-state wide wineries. Raymond Vineyards alone has tripled its amount of visitors since Boisset took over. In addition to his business coup, he also saw personal success in the same year, marrying now-wife Gina Gallo of E&J Gallo, the largest wine producer in the United States. The two now split their time between their stunning

Nob Hill apartment, where they entertain friends such as Dr. Eliza Stephens, Michael Mina and Gary Danko, and their Wappo Hill estate, which was formerly owned by Robert Mondavi.



The purchase of Mondavi's estate is significant, as the now-deceased vintner is considered to be the pioneer of Napa Valley. In a similar fashion to the wine legend, whatever Boisset touches seems to turn to gold. That extends to his JCB Brand, a stylistic collection of wines referenced by a specific number. His wealth will assuredly continue to grow, as his JCB line has now extended into luxury lifestyle products that include candles, wine openers and even a signature saber. He is also close to launching a limited edition of jewelry that is embedded into bottles of wine, something that's never been done in the industry, and which was conceived to display a wine bottle as a decanter and a beautiful piece of art. This is typical Boisset: he sees beauty in the unexpected. "If I walked into a room filled with people, I would want them to do be doing whatever they desire; being themselves and having the opportunity to express their artistic expressions," he maintains. This also extends to his daughters. Though he says he'll be happy with whatever two-and-a-half-year-old twins Honorée-Josephine and Grace-Antoinette decide to do, he does hope that they will one day carry on his vision of innovative winemaking. "Would I be disappointed if they don't pursue? Yes, for sure," he admits. "I want them to know it inside out, and I want them to own it. I would not want to imagine that we would sell the family collection that we started."

At the same time, he also wants to make sure that his daughters' lives are steeped in creativity and passion. "My goal is to make sure that I 'invent' people who can make a difference creatively in the world. I'm not interested in having 'good girls'," he says. That goes for Boisset himself. "I have more creativity, very unique products and artistic expression," he says. "Life is a short film – too short- which allows us to play a role, if we wish...I'm living only five percent of what I wish to do."

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