

## Company Focus

### Boisset Collection: Mixing the Wine Business with Passion for Life

by Heather Martin



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### Company Profile

**Founded:** 2012

**Headquarters:** St. Helena, California

**Top Executive:** Jean-Charles Boisset, Owner and Co-Founder

**Products:** Wine, gifts and accessories

**Salespeople:** 1,800

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### Jean-Charles Boisset talks about wine the way most people talk about love.



Jean-Charles Boisset

"Wine is magical," he says. "It's a beautiful gift that Mother Nature has granted to us."

Boisset owns Boisset Collection, a family of wineries in France and Napa Valley, California, that also operates a growing direct sales channel. But wine is so much more than a business for Boisset. For him, wine transcends the grape and the glass—wine is a life changer. And that's exactly what the Boisset Independent Ambassador program is all about, say Boisset and the program's Co-Founder and National Director, Melissa Lynch; changing people's lives by giving them a chance to be financially independent and discover the world of wine in the process.



Melissa Lynch

Boisset might be as zealous about direct selling as he is about wine. "It's the most exciting thing I've personally ever done," he says of the program, now in its fourth year. "There's no other model that allows you to have a limitless amount of people energized by what you do."



Lynch says Boisset's energy for this venture is palpable. "He's the No. 1 recruiter we have," she says. "When you can get him in front of a room, he moves everybody to want to do better."

The Ambassador program is still in its infancy and, as a private company, Boisset Collection doesn't publicly share sales information. But Boisset says the program is doubling its revenue every year and has enrolled more than 1,800 Ambassadors to market and sell Boisset Collection wines. As is the case for many executives in direct sales, the people numbers are the numbers that matter most to Boisset.

"Our profit is secondary," he says. "There's no rush.

There's no ultimatum. There's no quarterly insane results necessary."

Boisset says the program, which launched in 2012, accounts for a very small percentage of revenue at his wineries, which also distribute to retail locations and restaurants. But it is the fastest-growing percentage, he says. The Ambassador program also has created more brand awareness for the overall company, and Boisset says he is confident that over the next several years, he will see a return.

If recent wine sales in the United States are any indication, the market does seem ripe for a direct wine sales channel. According to Wines & Vines, a publication that tracks the players in and the health of the wine industry, overall wine sales in the United States totaled \$38 billion in 2015. This is an increase of about \$1 billion a year, or an average of 3 percent annually, based on total nationwide wine sales of \$34.6 billion in 2012, as reported by the Wine Institute. Perhaps more compelling, though, is the growth in direct-to-consumer shipments—the way Ambassador program customers receive their wine. According to Wines & Vines, the retail value of such shipments was \$2 billion in 2015, an increase of 34 percent over 2012.

Boisset's Ambassador program also may benefit from the fact that direct selling for wine companies is still a relatively new concept—and the space isn't very crowded. Only three other similar companies appear in a list of top Google search results.



## Heirloom Vines

Boisset says he's been intrigued by the idea of social selling since he was a teenager in his native Burgundy, France. In the 1960s and 1970s, he watched his parents and grandparents grow the family vineyards while cultivating a community of people to share in their passion for wine and for the personal connections they believed it could create.

"People would come to our dining room, and my mother would serve glasses of wine to people from all walks of life," Boisset says. And then his grandfather would write hundreds of letters to the people who had tasted the family's wines, saying things like, "It was a pleasure to meet you—we have a new wine coming up and you may want to try it." Boisset says that even at age 6 or 7, he was drawn to his family's way of blending business and personal relationships. "I was doing my homework at the table and seeing them sending their letters and building their clubs. I think it was really magical."

Now, decades later, Boisset sees the entire Ambassador community as a scalable version of those family gatherings around the dining room table. An Ambassador shares wines at what the company describes as "intimate home-tasting experiences," introducing guests to small-production wines priced at \$25 and up, most of which are made in such limited quantities that they are sold only in tasting rooms or through a Boisset Ambassador. The goal of the Ambassador program is to give anyone a chance to access these wines, even if they can't travel all the way to Napa, Sonoma or Burgundy, Boisset says. "We bring the tasting room experience to them in a social, engaging and comfortable environment."

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This accessibility can be rare in the wine industry, Boisset continues. "The wine world is often a very opaque, intimidating world," he says. "No one should be intimidated by wine."

The chance to demystify and break down barriers to wine were major motivators for Lynch to work with Boisset on this initiative, she says. "We're reaching a whole new demographic of people we haven't been able to reach before and are helping other people be successful."

Prior to joining Boisset, Lynch had been in the wine business for more than 15 years, having co-founded another direct selling company, so she was familiar with the mechanics of selling wine this way. One of the things she loves about the Boisset direct selling program is that the Ambassadors can visit the wineries and meet the growers who are tending the vines. "It's an authentic experience," she says.

## A World of Opportunity

While Ambassadors do come from various backgrounds, Boisset says 80 percent of Ambassadors are women in their 30s, 40s or 50s who have children and a wide network of friends and family and want to work part time. Some men have joined the program, too—often teaming up with their wives—as a supplement to another direct selling venture they're running, he says. An Ambassador home-tasting party will generate between \$750 and \$1,000 in sales—with some higher-performing Ambassadors booking as much as \$3,000 on average, Boisset says. As with many direct selling businesses, Ambassadors earn a commission on those sales and also can earn commission on sales made by Ambassadors they recruit.

Some Ambassadors do book very large orders because they have a network of high-income contacts looking for high-dollar wines, in the \$300, \$400 or even \$500 per bottle range. One California Ambassador in particular has organized wine events for such A-list tasters as Sharon Osbourne, Pharrel Williams and pre-Oscar partygoers. "We have some people in Texas with incredible networks, too," Lynch says, noting that there was a tasting in Texas that booked more than \$40,000 in sales in one night. "We have people blowing the doors off."

The company also sees opportunity to target event planners and caterers, who would have substantial built-in customer bases. Continued geographic expansion is on the radar, as well. About 60 percent of the company's Ambassadors are in California—which is 20 percent less concentrated than in 2013. And Boisset ships directly to about 30 states, not including those that still prohibit interstate wine shipments. Lynch says that laws are changing all the time, though, and she sees the Midwest and East Coast as the next big frontiers for the channel.

Wherever they are based, most Ambassadors begin modestly—in network and in knowledge. Beginner Ambassadors usually know nothing about wine when they start, Boisset says, and they don't have to become sommeliers to be successful. But the company does support its associates with training—not just on how to run a tasting but on how to discuss such things as wine and food pairings and the chemistry of wine, Lynch explains.

Ambassadors also connect with Boisset himself on regular conference calls, and they come to the Napa Valley for retreats once a year to share best practices, visit the wineries and learn the stories behind the wines they will introduce to guests. Sharing these stories about the wines is an important part of the Ambassador experience, Boisset says, because they reveal the traditions behind and the history of the wineries as well as highlight the company's commitment to environmental sustainability—which includes such things as organic farming methods and solar-powered vineyard operations.

A related and promising revenue stream for Boisset Collection is the Circle of Boisset Wine Club, Lynch says. Since the direct selling channel launched, more than 3,000 people have joined the club, and Boisset is preparing to increase the frequency of shipments, which is only quarterly right now.

## Generations of Commitment

Boisset's passion for wine and direct selling seems matched only by his passion for family and for keeping the Boisset collection of vineyards close to home. He visits his parents, who are now in their 70s, regularly in France and is still very close to his grandmother, who is 103. He hopes that his twin 5-year-old daughters will feel that deep connection to family and to wine when they grow up and will want to manage the business. At the very least, he's made sure they will inherit everything he and his family have built. "We have vineyards which are so spectacular, I would not want them to part ways with them," he says. For Boisset, wine makes his living, but it also makes his life. And when he sees investors jumping in and out of the industry, hoping for short-term gain, he just sits back and watches.

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"Good for them," Boisset says, with a wink in his voice. "At the same time, I'm smiling because I know where we're going. I'm going to keep building and building, and it's going to keep getting stronger. You cash in and for what? You go to the beach? That's not going to happen."

He says his focus is on continuing to create great wine and grow opportunities for more and more people to join him on what he says is the best journey someone can take.

While Boisset prefers not to share revenue projections, he says he would like to enroll as many as 8,000 Ambassadors, which is more than quadruple the number on board right now. He's looking for people who see wine like he does, as kind of an existential portal. "The Ambassador program helps you discover yourself. It's the future to anyone who wants to be connected with the essence, the source of anything we do in life."

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