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Jean-Charles Boisset

A MAN IN LOVE WITH TWO COUNTRIES BELIEVES THAT WINE CAN BRING THEM CLOSER TOGETHER

By DOROTHY J. GAITER



Jean-Charles Boisset is enjoying a serious love affair with America. It started about 20 years ago when he convinced his father, Jean-Claude Boisset, to let him open a Napa Valley outpost of the family's Burgundy-based wine-producing and négociant business. Jean-Charles is now president of The Boisset Collection, the third-largest family-owned wine company in France, with a portfolio that includes choice wineries in California and Canada.

In 2013, the French-American Foundation awarded Boisset its first-ever French-American Partnership of Excellence Award, and this past November, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts gave him its Thomas Jefferson Award,

which honors the institution's "historical connection with Thomas Jefferson and his renowned love of fine wine." In 2012, Wine Enthusiast magazine declared Raymond Vineyards the American Winery of the Year. "This Napa Valley icon has been completely remade by swashbuckling Frenchman Jean-Charles Boisset," the headline read.

If "swashbuckling" conjures an image of a big personality, Boisset fits the bill. He looks like a tall, mischievous little boy, and his taste in clothes earned him the Nob Hill Gazette's Best Dressed Man accolade in 2014. At a recent Manhattan event, for example, he sported a royal blue suit, a custom-made white shirt, a sparkling brooch, red-black-and-white shoes, and of course his signature red socks. Not the deep garnet of

Burgundy—more like Taylor Swift's lipstick.

"I love America, its history, its spirit of innovation, its freedom," says Boisset. From all appearances, that includes the freedom to shed the staid trappings of France's legendary wine regions and to pursue his wildest dreams—from his famously over-the-top wine cellar décors to developing unique market niches.

Jean-Charles was born in 1969 in Vougeot, a tiny Burgundian village of 176 people. His bedroom was above the family wine cellars (his father founded the family wine business in 1961). He and his older sister, Nathalie, now the company's director of communications, grew up hearing wonderful things about America from their paternal grandparents. His grandmother was orphaned during World War I, and an American officer and businessman sent \$1 a month toward her education.

During World War II, his grandparents, both schoolteachers, joined the Resistance. "They frequently talked about how Granddad had returned home after the war accompanied by American soldiers who had restored the liberty of the French people," he says. "My grandparents had such a high regard for America that they often urged me to visit this great country. I remember a dinner one Sunday when I was quite young; my grandmother, who is now 101, looked at me and said, 'What are you doing here? You should be in America.' And I said, 'But I'm only six!'"

When Boisset was 11, his grandparents treated him and Nathalie to a trip to California. They notably visited Buena Vista Winery, California's oldest producer of premium wines, founded in 1857. "My grandparents bought a bottle of their Chardonnay and let us have a little in our hotel room. I told my sister then that it would be great one day to make wine in California."

His first U.S. acquisition occurred more than two decades later. It was August

2003, and Boisset had brought some of his best winemakers and grape growers from Burgundy to explore the vineyards of the Russian River Valley to find a suitable property to purchase. They decided on DeLoach Vineyards.

"We recognized that the Russian River and the DeLoach estate boasted a terroir perfect for exceptional Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. It was a little piece of Burgundy in California," he recalls. "Meanwhile, France was experiencing one of the hottest summers on record, and we suddenly realized that the harvest would have to begin right away, in the middle of the French summer vacation! Our winemakers got on the phone and started calling everyone, telling them to come home and start picking grapes."

Boisset's California winemakers proved to be a valuable resource. "They had more experience with hot summers and early harvests, so they could offer advice that our French team used in the vineyards and cellars to make the most of a very unique vintage in Burgundy," he says. "It was the moment that cemented our French-American team, each bringing expertise and knowledge that made the other better."

In 2011, he purchased the Sonoma winery he had visited as a child: Buena Vista Winery with its hand-dug Champagne Cellars. A California Historic Landmark, the Cellars had last produced wine in 1979 and had been closed to the public since the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989. (Though a proud Frenchman, Boisset apparently doesn't quibble with the name "Champagne Cellars.")

He set about restoring the property, and the Cellars reopened on August 31, 2012, the 200th anniversary of the birthday of the founder, Hungarian Count Agoston Haraszthy. With music and wine flowing, local officials and Hungarian VIPs were on hand to watch Boisset cut the red ribbon across the doors. The California Preservation Foundation awarded him the 2013 California Preservation Design Award for "Craftsmanship / Preservation Technology" in recognition of the innovative way the renovated structure was strengthened to resist seismic shocks.

In addition to DeLoach and Buena Vista, the family now owns Raymond Vineyards in Napa, Lyeth Estate in Sonoma, Lockwood Vineyard in Monterey and Frenchie Winery in Napa. In all, The Boisset Collection boasts



● From top: A festive gathering at Sonoma's historic Buena Vista Winery, which Boisset entirely renovated; the luxurious, appointment-only JCB Lounge in Napa Valley.

more than 20 estates worldwide and sells wines in 80 countries.

In 2009, Boisset sealed the ultimate French-American wine deal when he married winemaker Gina Gallo, granddaughter of Julio and grand-niece of Ernest, the founders of California-based E. & J. Gallo Winery, the world's largest family-owned winery. In 2011, their twin daughters were born; the family now lives in the expansive Napa home built for the late Robert Mondavi, who did so much to put America's wines before the world.

A whirling dervish of an entrepreneur, Boisset is a compelling blend of Old and New World sensibilities. He loves history but also has a laser-like focus on the future. He has insisted, for instance, that all of his properties on both sides of the Atlantic be

organically and biodynamically farmed. And his environmentally friendly Tetra Pak wine containers (used for his French Rabbit line) have won converts in Canada and the U.S.

One of his more unconventional ideas came about a few years ago when he was walking across the parking lot at Raymond and noticed a car idling to keep the air conditioner on for its occupants, two dogs. He turned off the ignition, scooped up the pups, walked into the tasting room and asked who was their owner. A woman sheepishly raised her hand and explained that she takes her dogs everywhere and felt bad about leaving them in the car.

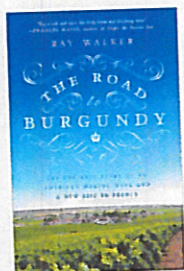
"I told her not to worry, that I would build a winery for dogs," he relates. A few days later, Frenchie was on the drawing board. Frenchie is the name of Boisset's bulldog, and his

mille feuilles

• **Ladurée Macarons: The Recipes** by *Ladurée pastry chefs*. In the mid-20th century, Pierre Desfontaines created the first Ladurée macaron by putting a ganache filling between two macaron cookies. This new cookbook features recipes for 130 versions: creations for destinations and holidays, precious ones made with edible gold, and exotic flavors such as violet. Then there are the designer exclusives such as Christian Louboutin's black-and-red Figue et Datte, best paired with Port. Yummy! *Chêne*, \$39.95.



• **Les Marquis de Ladurée: Chocolate** by *Serge Gleizes et al.* Someone grab a fan, quick! This beautiful book of recipes for sensuous chocolate pastries and bonbons contains this sentence: "Talking about chocolate is like talking about love; our emotions can be overwhelming. All of our senses are aroused: sight, touch, taste, smell...." Oh my! *Chêne*, \$39.95.



• **The Road to Burgundy: The Unlikely Story of an American Making Wine and a New Life in France** by *Ray Walker*. Walker, who worked for Merrill Lynch in California, tasted a Burgundy that changed his life. With little money, rudimentary French and only a basic knowledge of winemaking, he moved to France in 2009. That same year, benefiting from a quirk in the market for grapes, he became the first non-French winemaker to purchase grapes and produce a wine from Le Chambertin, one of the most famous vineyards in the world. Unlikely indeed! *Gotham Publishing*, \$17.

• **Hot Dogs & Croissants** by *Natasha Saulnier & Victorine Saulnier*. The subtitle says it all: "The Culinary Misadventures of Two French Women Who Moved to America, Got Fat, Got Skinny (again), and Mastered Eating Well in the USA—With Recipes." The Saulnier sisters' entertaining food memoir will brighten your winter. *Skyhorse Publishing*, \$23.95 (February 2015).



• **Better Made at Home: Salty, Sweet, Satisfying Snacks and Pantry Staples You Can Make Yourself** by *Estérelle Payany*. In this fun book, Payany, a best-selling French cookbook author and culinary journalist, takes more than 80 packaged foods—from fish sticks to chocolate-coated ice cream pops to potato chips—and tells you how to make healthier versions at home. For the kid in you. *Black Dog & Leventhal*, \$19.95.

• **The Little French Bakery Cookbook** by *Susan M. Holding*. Another French dream fulfilled, this time for a nurse who liked to bake. Through a fortuitous mistake, Holding heard about a course at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris and signed up. She earned a Diplôme de Pâtisserie and today operates the Little French Bakery and Cooking School in North Freedom, Wisconsin. Her book shares recipes she teaches her students, such as Pain au Chocolat and Stovetop Grilled Salmon. *Skyhorse Publishing*, \$24.95.



portrait, in the guise of figures in French and American history, adorns the labels of the line. The winery provides a comfortable place for the canines to hang out and drink water while their owners taste—and hopefully buy—wine at Raymond.

Yet another iconoclastic venture is the line of wines that bear his initials, JCB. Launched in 2009, there are now more than a dozen; each has a number instead of a name and was inspired by a different story. No. 69, the sparkler, is from his birth year. No. 3 is a Burgundy (Côte de Nuits) blended with Pinot Noir (Sonoma County) "to make the wine of my dreams." The union of wines from his native and adopted countries is called No. 3 "because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." All the JCB wines, he says, are "beyond terroir; they are about style."

Boisset's newest initiative is Boisset Wine Living (think modern-day Avon Lady with wine). "We wanted to bring the tasting room experience into people's homes," he says. "Sometimes people can be intimidated about pronouncing names or whatever. This way, consumers and their friends can try new, limited-production and exclusive releases in



• A painting at Boisset's Frenchie winery portrays his bulldog as Marie Antoinette.

the comfort of their living room. We already have more than 600 ambassadors, mostly women, who conduct tastings of French and American wines in a range of prices. And we are hiring more."

With two young daughters at home, Boisset now spends a bit more than half his time in the U.S. That said, he takes the girls to France at least four times a year to keep them in touch with their French roots. As for his own French identity, he says, "My sister thinks I've become more American than French. That's OK with me, I consider it a compliment! But I love both countries. In France, we embrace and celebrate history and tradition and are passionate about our lifestyle and connection to the land. The spirit of California is one of discovery, innovation and pioneering. I couldn't live without the energy of both."