

## Jean-Charles Boisset: Hook, wine and sinker

From the perfect recipe for the wine bubble-bath to tetra packs, there's nothing the 'James Bond of the wine world' hasn't taken a shot at

Sat, Feb 11 2017. Pradip Kumar Saha



Jean-Charles Boisset, 47, first tasted wine as a baby. "In my mother's womb," he says. "She never stopped drinking it even when she was heavily pregnant with me."

France has a tradition of a parent dabbing a little finger into a glass of wine and offering an infant his or her first taste, he reminds me. "It is a sign of good luck. In my case, it was more than just the pinky's worth."

Wine is an integral part of Boisset's life. He is the president of the Boisset Collection, among the biggest French winemaking groups, set up in 1961 by his parents—he runs it with his elder sister Nathalie. The group has 26 wineries spread across 17 regions and two countries—France and the US. In 2016, the company sold 82 million 750ml bottles across 90 countries, up 3.5 million bottles from the previous year.

Boisset was on his maiden business trip to India to launch two of his wines, under the labels DeLoach and the eponymous JCB. When we met at Delhi's Hyatt Regency hotel last month, the first things I noticed were his Christian Louboutin shoes and tomato-red socks. Boisset has a reputation for being audacious, both in his dressing and his business decisions—he created the first Tetra Pak for wines.

"This is the moment for India in its tryst with wine," says Boisset. India is one of the world's most prolific alcohol-guzzling countries but wine consumption is less than 1% of the total alcoholic beverage market, with whisky taking the lion's share. And that surprises Boisset.

"Indians outside the country are wine drinkers. Indian food is so rich, complex and diverse in terms of textures, ingredients and spices that it is meant to be paired with wine," Boisset says. "So I am actually very surprised that wine hasn't boomed in India yet because it seems so obvious to me." Part of the reason, according to him, is that it hasn't been presented in the right manner. "Maybe the barriers to entry were high or the structure of wine imports is not in place or the tariffs are too high. But I am still bullish about the future," he says.

Around 18 months ago, Boisset struck up a partnership with Fratelli wines to bring some of its labels to the country. Retailing will take time—the first step is to establish a connection with wine drinkers. To that end, and to avoid higher import duties, Fratelli has tied up with select hotels and restaurant chains that have a duty-free licence.



Jean-Charles Boisset. Illustration by Jayachandran/Mint

\*\*\*\*\*

Boisset always wears red socks and the shoes are always Louboutins. "I love the colour (red) and its energy," he says. Today, he is wearing a pair of black Chrisolido Oxfords with a butterfly design over the tongue and throat. A self-designed, two-buttoned white shirt with a longer collar band, a purple Tom Ford suit and a self-designed brooch on the lapel complete the ensemble.

But his sartorial elegance goes beyond clothing.

In 2005, he introduced Tetra Paks to the wine industry with the launch of The French Rabbit. "The idea was to reduce the carbon footprint by making a recyclable casing that was also portable and travel-friendly," he says.

Although this didn't do well in Europe, it became a rage in the US and Canada, and is one of the fastest growing packaging types for wine in the US today. In 2012, he launched Surrealist by JCB, a Napa Valley red blend wine that comes with a decanter and pieces of jewellery—somewhat like the old days, when a piece of jewellery would be put on the bottle instead of the label. One can even remove the piece and wear it as a brooch. Similarly, the Baccarat crystal stopper enables the bottle to be used as a decanter later.

“Audacity is about going beyond the obvious and it is in our DNA,” says Boisset. “Audacity for us is organic and biodynamic farming. It's about how you package your product. It is constantly thinking about how to create a world around our wines. Audacity is coming to India at this time and launching a wine. And audacity will be to bring cashmere and *pashmina* in our wineries and look at what we could do with that in terms of design.” Despite the sluggish growth in wine consumption in India, Boisset insists he is not in it for quick numbers, but for the long haul.

Some years ago, Boisset also created the “perfect recipe for the bubble bath”. “I took two cases of JCB 69, which is 18 litres, and added the same amount of warm water. A bathtub is typically 42 litres, so 36 litres is just about right,” he says. “This was my Valentine's Day gift to my wife, Gina. We were supposed to go out that evening, which didn't happen. We stayed home and nine months later, our twin girls were born” (the bubble-bath experience has since been added to the menu at the company's Raymond Vineyards in California).

---

**"Boisset designs his shirts and socks himself. He also loves to design jewellery. "I have always thought men were underappreciated on the jewellery front because we don't have much besides a wedding band and a watch," he says. So he started designing cufflinks, chains and brooches a couple of years ago. "We have more than 100 pieces now," he says. The company has used some of these on its bottles."**

---

\*\*\*\*\*

Boisset has never thought of wine as business. "I was born in a vineyard; it was my playground. My bedroom was just on top of the winery. The barrels, the tanks, they were all around. So in all honesty, I have always looked at wine as a game. I was helping in the cellar as any child would help his parents. If my parents had a restaurant, I would have washed the dishes or waited tables," he muses.

Boisset was born in 1969 to Jean-Claude and Claudine of Vougeot village in France's Burgundy region. He went to the US as a teenager and finished high school there. After undergraduate studies at the London Business School, he returned to the US for a master's in business administration in finance from the University of California, Los Angeles, which he completed in 1993. "I never studied viticulture," says Boisset. "It came naturally to me. If I were to do it again, I think I would study the arts."

Boisset even worked in corporate finance in Germany for about a year before returning to the family business. The love for numbers and spreadsheets has stayed with him, however, and it reflects in the number of deals he has struck and the acquisitions he has made over the years. Some of the wineries that are now in his fold have a history dating back to the 14th century.

Boisset bought his first California winery, the Lyeth Estates, in 1994. In 1999, he co-founded Domaine de la Vougeraie with his sister to consolidate the family's vineyards in the Burgundy region. Four years later, he purchased DeLoach Vineyards in California's Russian River Valley, followed by Raymond Vineyards in Napa Valley, California, in 2009 and the Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma, California, in 2011.

In 2009, Boisset married Gina Gallo, granddaughter of Julio Gallo. Julio, along with his brother Ernest, had founded the E&J Gallo Winery in Modesto, California in 1933. Today, Gallo wines are available in 90 countries. Though Boisset and Gina manage two of the world's biggest winemaking groups, the only time wine is mentioned in a conversation is when the couple is "tasting wines".

Boisset reckons wine is generally under-represented across the world. It could be one of the reasons he uses wine to get several messages across. "People haven't embraced wine enough. I would love to see wine being considered as food, an ingredient," he says. "Wine is the epicentre of a lot of different things that are about design, fashion, decor, jewellery, and about art at large."

According to the 2011 census figures, nearly 40% of India's population is aged between 18-40. It is this age group that Boisset is targeting. "When I think of wine, I think about a certain art of living," says Boisset. "The liquid is important, of course, but all the things that come with it are equally important...the packaging and the presentation...the shoes, the socks, the decanter, a certain way of life."

Jean-Charles Boisset brings that lifestyle to the table.