

# families of wine

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MEININGER MEDIA



# Boisset

Dynamism from the heart of Burgundy



Jean-Claude Boisset

**T**he story of JC Boisset and Boisset La Famille des Grands Vins is one of the most extraordinary in the wine world. It all began in 1961, when Jean-Claude Boisset decided to go into the wine business. This would not have been an unusual step, given that he had grown up in the heart of Burgundy, except that he was only 18 years old and had no wine trade background; his parents were schoolteachers, not vigneron. But

Boisset was insistent and, despite his youth and inexperience, proved remarkably successful at buying good wine in barrels from small producers and selling it in bottle, initially to his parents' friends. A few years later, with his father's help, he went further, buying his first vineyard, a fine plot in Gevrey-Chambertin.

At the time, most of the trade in Burgundy was handled by a small

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From the beginning, the Boisset name has stood for doing things differently and taking daring risks that have paid off, even when others said they couldn't be done.

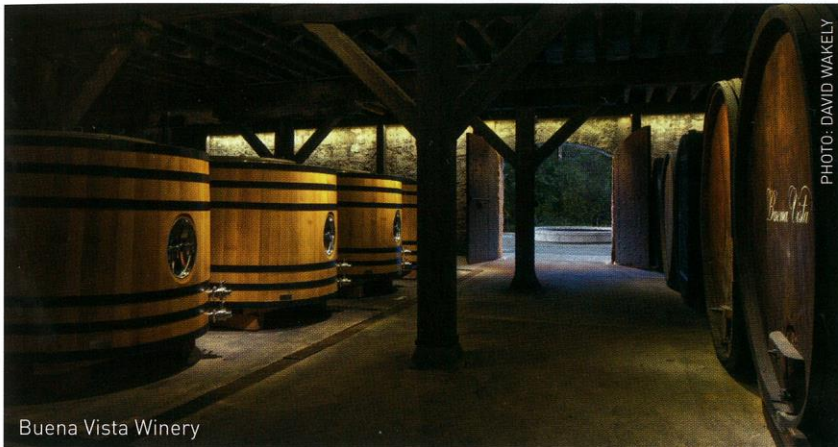
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number of well-established negociants, or merchants. Boisset, however, succeeded in finding new customers for his wines, both in France and, more especially in overseas markets such as the UK and US. Indeed, by the mid 1970s, his business was one of the biggest exporters to North America. Understanding the need both to own good vineyards and the value of branding, Boisset – subsequently with the help of son Jean-Charles, and daughter Nathalie – created the top class Domaine de la Vougeraie estate, and purchased well-established historical houses, such as Bouchard Aîné & Fils, Jaffelin, Ropiteau Frères, J. Moreau & Fils in Chablis, Mommessin in Beaujolais and Bonpas in the Rhône. More recently, Languedoc Roussillon has been added to the portfolio with the purchase of Skalli and Fortant.

While Boisset senior had an instinctive skill at marketing which was very rare in the French wine industry, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, a spell in the US at an early age gave son Jean-Charles even greater understanding of the global wine business, and of the potential for winemaking in California. Acquisitions there have included DeLoach Vineyards, Raymond Vineyards in Napa and Buena Vista, the oldest premium winery in Sonoma, as well as Lockwood and Lyeth. Boisset Junior, whose showman-like personality and taste for innovative spectacle might have made him a highly successful



Gina and Jean-Charles Boisset



Buena Vista Winery

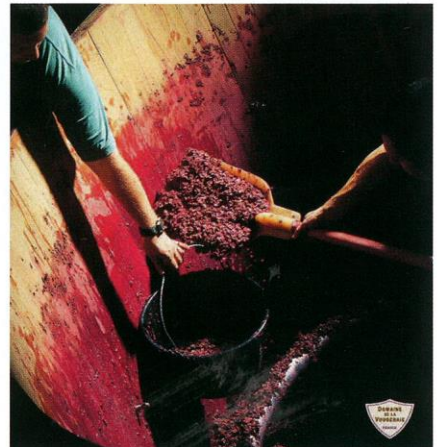


PHOTO: DAVID WAKELY

theatrical impresario in another life, has surprised observers on both sides of the Atlantic with his readiness to embrace ultra-modern packaging, such as bag-in-box-in-a-barrel concepts for restaurants, Tetra Pak cartons, and PET bottles and cans, while also introducing organic and biodynamic farming in his best US and French vineyards.

Today, the Boisset French businesses are among the biggest wine exporters in France, while the Californian estates and a dynamic distribution business make Boisset a name to be reckoned with in the highly competitive US market. Competitors and observers alike struggle to keep up with new Boisset initiatives, ranging from the introduction of a super-premium Pinot Noir made from a blend of Burgundy and Californian wine, to a sparkling wine range called JCB, to the introduction of 'make-your-own-blend'

features where visitors can create their own Napa and Sonoma wines, and the creation of an 'Ambassador' programme that allows consumers to sell Boisset wines to their friends, in an echo of the activities with which Jean-Claude Boisset began his business over 50 years ago.

Jean-Claude Boisset is still very active in the French business, where his daughter Nathalie is responsible for communications. Jean-Charles is very active in both the US and France, though he resides most often in the US with his wife Gina Gallo and their twin daughters, overlooking the Napa Valley. It is impossible to predict what new elements might be added to the Boisset Collection, but it's certain that none of them will be undertaken lightly. Behind the flamboyant façade and genuinely warm personality, competitors have discovered that Jean-Charles Boisset, like his father, has a very fine head for business.

People who questioned the wisdom of some of the purchases and the – to some Napa traditionalists – shockingly daring design decisions at the Raymond winery, for example, have learned that almost all have paid off handsomely and are continuing to do so.

The Burgundy of the first decades of the 21st century is a very different place to the sleepy region in which Jean-Claude Boisset first entered the wine business. Its current dynamism, owes much to the ambition and enthusiasm he helped to introduce.

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