

INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS SHAPING OUR FUTURE

Game Changers 2015



GAMECHANGERS 2015

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By Christina Julian

As I wait for Jean-Charles Boisset, whose family wine collection has a presence in 80 countries and includes 24 estate properties, I'm regaled with stories and told by Tamara Stanfill, communications specialist for Boisset Collections, that Boisset is high energy. "We always say, 'If only we could bottle his energy.' When he's on premise, we just know."

It's hard to understand how, short of an intercom or cellphone shorthand, given the size of the Raymond Vineyards mega-complex in St. Helena. Yet, 10 minutes later, I can almost intuit Boisset's arrival. His presence is soon confirmed when he whisks away the shimmering curtains of the JCB Lounge, just one of the many glitzy spaces at the property. He welcomes me like only a good Frenchman could do: with a hand flourish and smooth smile. Despite the gallant entrance, he exudes nothing short of electric energy.

Born in 1969 to parents Jean-Claude and Claudine Boisset in the quaint village of Vougeot in Burgundy, France, his entrée into the wine world was sealed when the family founded its first winery, Jean-Claude Boisset, and purchased its first vineyard,

Burgundy. He's also built a steadfast presence in California through the acquisition of historical estates that he spins in unimaginable directions. "Guests find Raymond enchanting, engaging, provocative, outlandish and just plain fun," says Pam Simpson, CEO/President, St. Helena Chamber of Commerce. "Between the art, the wine and the décor, people truly enjoy being at Raymond. We're making wine, after all, so let's have fun with it. Kudos to Jean-Charles for not only remembering that but for also being a pioneer in experiential tourism."

In 2003, Boisset guided the purchase of DeLoach Vineyards in Russian River Valley as a tribute to his native land. Next came the acquisition of Raymond Vineyards in 2009, a property that sizzles with opulence. In 2011, Boisset surrendered to serendipity when he purchased Buena Vista, actualizing his childhood dream.

It's this type of idea-into-action that Boisset is known for. He doesn't just dream big, he *does* big. "I adore creating experiences and always want to push it much more. I really feel that I understand what people want to have when they come to a winery...but we don't just make wine, what we want to do is much more: create dreams."

Developing wine tasting experiences for all the senses

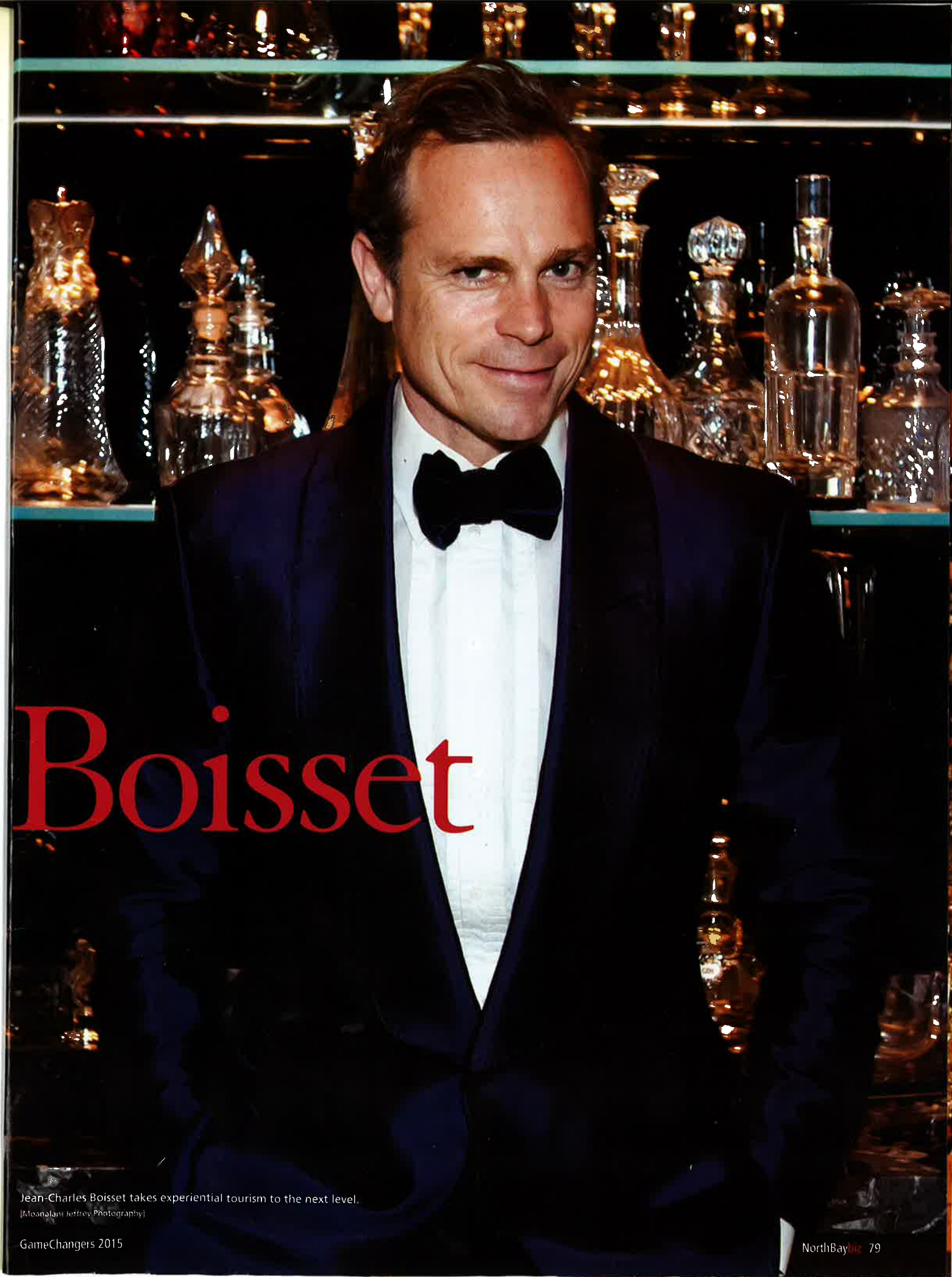
Jean-Charles Boisset

Les Evocelles, in Gevrey-Chambertin, in 1964. A fortuitous family trip to Sonoma's historic Buena Vista winery at age 11 would foretell Boisset's future as a shapeshifter in the California wine industry. He's built a reputation on taking tasting room experiences and wine release parties to the extreme. Whether it's making wine or candles, crafting a jewelry line or doing his part to preserve Mother Earth, he does it with equal measures of flamboyance, innovation and enthusiasm, which is why he was chosen as a game changer this year.

Dream maker

Under Boisset's direction, the family collection has become one of the leading wine producers in

For anyone else, the role of "dream maker" might sound like a stretch, but Boisset sees it as a calling—and, it seems, others agree. "Jean Charles Boisset is truly one of the most inspirational men I've ever met," says Brenda Lohmer, co-founder of Napa Valley Film Festival. "He encouraged my husband and I to take a huge risk, follow our dreams and be true to our vision when we were starting the Napa Valley Film Festival back in 2009, when many were doubting us and even hoping we'd fail. He knows what he wants and how to achieve his goals, even when others think his ideas are impossible to execute. And the greatest thing is, he's an authentic human being. He genuinely loves to connect people."



Jean-Charles Boisset takes experiential tourism to the next level.
[Meenalan Jettrey Photography]

The Surreal Becomes Real

To say Jean-Charles Boisset is a smartly dressed man is an understatement. Today, he wears an impeccably tailored, electric blue suit, accented with a unique brooch on the lapel—which happens to be an accouterment from his Surrealist wine collection. The line launched in February and can best be described as a wine, decanter and jewelry line, rolled into one. “Wine, as far as I’m concerned, is like a beautiful woman with the most sensual shape, and therefore deserves the coolest jewelry on her,” he explains.

Instead of opting for the standard wine bottle and cork, the Surrealist morphs into a decanter capped with a Baccarat topper. The requisite label is swapped for an adornment that looks more like a luxury piece of jewelry. “Often, we recycle a bottle of wine, which is nice, but wouldn’t it be great to enjoy a phenomenal bottle of wine and keep it as the ultimate decanter?” The wine can be purchased on its own or as a set that includes the Baccarat topper and a brooch.

The collection stems from an 18th century tradition. “There were no labels in those days. A wine would have a necklace, where you would write the name of the wine on it and then take off the necklace and use it for the next wine you were serving.”



Jean-Charles Boisset entertains guests in the Crystal Cellar at Raymond Vineyards. (Photo by Jason Tinacci)



The X factor

Boisset isn't entirely comfortable with the term "game changer."

"I think 'change' is a strong word. I feel we aren't changing, but helping to evolve the industry. Energy, audacity, respect, creativity: These values guide everything we do. And it's also why we're perceived as being a little bit different." At Raymond, difference strikes at every turn. From the Crystal Cellar and its mirrored tasting bar to the stainless steel walls and mannequins that drape over active wine tanks, there's no mistaking that Boisset has a vision all his own. Then there's the velvet-ensconced Red Room that made a name for itself long before *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Winemaking takes a glamorous turn in the Blending Room, where visitors get to don shiny suits to make their own wines. "It's that ability and chance we have to create experiences that I get a lot of pleasure from," says Boisset.

Boisset pours this same level of energy into all that he does, including his commitment to biodynamic and organic farming at his properties. Not an obvious choice, given the extravagance at his estates, yet for every step of glam and glitz, there are



Napa Valley Film Festival co-founders Brenda and Marc Lhormer

experiences and measures to honor the land. "We don't believe conventional farming is the answer for the future. We feel that following the rhythm of nature is really the right way to be guided as far as what to do and how," says Boisset.

"It's heartening that JCB chooses to care about what he's doing to the earth. There are plenty of shortcuts available and, with his resources, he could easily take what he needs without regard for the future, but he doesn't. And what's more, he's doing things on a big stage with wild success," says Anton Ginella, winery estate gardens manager at Cakebread Cellars, who met Boisset at an event and was taken by his commitment to biodynamic farming.

Get the party started

Boisset has become infamous for the splashy soirées he throws at his properties, so it only makes sense that he'd take that convivial spirit and turn it into a business. The Boisset Wine Living Ambassador Program launched two years ago to help individuals start their own wine business through hosted gatherings that are similar to a Tupperware party for the wine sipping set.

"I've always wanted to empower people who enjoy wine to start their own business. With our ambassador program, we can continue the [tasting] experience for not only the happy few that are able to come here to Napa, Sonoma or Burgundy, but for the people who live elsewhere that still want to taste amazing wine from a really knowledgeable person."

Ambassadors are trained by Boisset's staff and are provided with a tasting kit, special wine glasses



Raymond Vineyards' Rutherford Room and Red Room
(Photos courtesy of Raymond Vineyards)



"It's heartening that JCB chooses to care about what he's doing to the earth."

—Anton Ginella, Cakebread Cellars

and detailed product information. "When people join as ambassadors, we educate them and give them lots of tools so they know how to do great tastings. They become experts and personal curators and, at the same time, they promote our wines that are mainly found in our tasting rooms."

Getting to know the family

In 2011, Boisset and Gallo welcomed twin girls Honorée-Josephine and Grace-Antoinette, who, it appears, have done little to slow him down. Like any good father figure, he loves all his children equally, which spills over into his wineries.

For every ounce of luxury that Raymond is steeped in, Buena Vista, which Boisset often refers to as "California's first premium winery" (founded in 1857), is rich in history and clonal diversity. "We're very proud of our American history. People tell themselves it's only France, Italy and Spain with a great history of wine. But America has one of the best histories, with the most compelling people from different countries, religions and ethnicities, creating one of the most powerful systems in the world." The winery is a nod to founder, Count Agoston Haraszthy—aka the Count of Buena

Vista, aka the Father of California viticulture—so anointed for his innovations in wine growing.

"Guests get to experience and taste the results of a library of varieties that people don't normally taste. We take visitors back in time and even give them the opportunity to meet the Count [an actor's portrayal]. We're a holder of his vision because he created an amazing viticultural and winemaking world. We're here to continue what he started and maybe add a little more to it. At every winery, whether it's Burgundy, here, or wherever, we always pay tribute to the family."

DeLoach became a part of the family collection in 2003, with Boisset's heritage evidenced at every turn. "It's Burgundy in Russian River Valley. As French people, we wanted a link between the Loire Valley and the winery, so we created the whole connection of the land, as well as the vision, history and the heritage that the DeLoach family had with the French aristocracy. We've been very playful."

"Playful," to Boisset, means taking things to the extreme. "The tank room has open-top wood fermenters, which is the finest way to make Pinot Noir. On the top of the tanks, you'll see heads, hands and feet. The heads because you think to

Frenchie Winery

In another moment of inspiration, Boisset built a "winery" on the Raymond property dedicated to dogs. It's named after the French Bulldog he bought for wife, Gina Gallo. "I got Frenchie so Gina would have a little Frenchman at home to look after her when I was away," he says. (Cue the "awwws.")

The idea for Frenchie Winery came to Boisset following an encounter with a pair of pooches who were left in a car outside of Raymond on a summer day, because the owners didn't want to miss out on tasting the wines. While flattered at the notion, he was compelled to take action. "I said, 'Bring them inside, we'll build a winery for the dogs.'

"Now people can look at their dog [via closed-circuit television] while they do a tasting and have a great time and everybody's happy."

Corridor of Senses

Given Boisset's penchant for crafting unique experiences, it's fitting he'd create a Corridor of Senses to "demystify" the wine tasting experience. This luxe passageway at Raymond Vineyards awakens the senses of sight, touch and smell in relation to the wines. Visitors can squeeze atomizer bulbs to aerate various wine fragrances such as cherry, smoke, mushroom and lavender. Other wine tasting terminology is explored through fabric swatches that bring concepts like "velvety on the palate" to life. Guests can even learn to distinguish between gradients of wine color by matching wine in the glass to the wall linings on display in the corridor.



Raymond Vineyards' Corridor of Senses features aromas, textures and colors to help make wine tasting more understandable. (Photo courtesy of Raymond Vineyards)



DeLoach Vineyards tasting room; (right): Buena Vista Winery at night (Photos courtesy of DeLoach Vineyards and Buena Vista Winery)

activate your hands and feet. Your hands control the movement of winemaking, and legs because you do *pigeage* [the stomping of grapes] in open fermentation tanks. We've created a whole artistic scene around that. It's a great room to taste the flamboyant wines of DeLoach. We also have a room we call *Les Libertines*, which is what, in the French Court, they used to do. A marriage was arranged, but you still had a heart, so you would flirt with people you would want to. That's our connection to winemaking—the rules, yet we don't let them rule, we let nature happen."

Boisset's namesake, the JCB line of wines and tasting lounges, embody his personality in style and wine descriptions. The latter are comprised of three descriptive words meant to reflect the feelings he hopes each wine will conjure. "For example, sensual, eternal, charismatic. These are words that let our guests enjoy and love the wine and also want to

live those words. We want to build an intellectual correlation between the meaning of the words to the actual tasting experience."

The next act

Boisset bounces from one new venture to the next with the ease that others vacillate between shaken or stirred when ordering a martini (coincidentally, the Boisset Collection also includes Idol vodka). And early fall will bring the opening of a new JCB tasting salon in Yountville, what Boisset sees as an epicurean paradise. "We'll present the finest products from around the world, with olive oil and pata negra ham, to foie gras, smoked salmon, nuts, mushrooms, coffee and more, which is all the top of the top." The space will stay true to the luxury interiors that are signature at all JCB Lounges. Guests will be able to taste the select wines from JCB and the Boisset Collection as they discover Napa Valley through

maps, interactive tables and other surprises that Boisset wasn't quite ready to reveal. "This is going to be very different for Yountville and will bring with it a great energy into the heart of the town."

August also marks the opening of another JCB tasting room, located inside the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco. "This will be one of the first full tasting salons ever to be within such a luxury hotel in San Francisco." In addition to tastings there will be an onsite concierge who can provide information on all the properties and book visits and tours at many of the estates.

Burning energy

While Boisset shows no signs of running low on energy, our time together must end, as he and his staff are readying for the opening of Buena Vista's Historical Wine Tool Museum, which happened in grand style this May with trick ropers, medicine men, the Meow Opera and more, with many local and political luminaries in attendance.

If I haven't been dazzled enough by Boisset's stories or sips of the JCB 69 bubbly and decadent French macaroons that accompany it, I'm left with some final thoughts on how he hopes to change the wine game and the people that inhabit his world.

"We want to make sure our guests have a superior experience that brings much more than purely drinking a beverage. I don't think wine is actually a beverage. It's not an SKU tag or a product or an island; it's a gift of God and we're so fortunate to have it. This is what we adore to make, drink and share. It's very important and, that whole circle, I think, is some of the most unique fun and sensational experiences we can create." ♦

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