
INTERVIEW

FROM BURGUNDY TO NAPA VALLEY

French flair and flamboyance go hand-in-hand with astute business sense

Mira Advani
Honeycutt meets
**Jean-Charles
Boisset**, the
flamboyant
president of Boisset
Family Estates
at Raymond
Vineyards, his 90-
acre flagship estate
in Napa Valley

To say that Jean-Charles Boisset is colourful is an understatement. Take his signature red socks that fit snugly inside Christian Louboutin shoes or bold designer jackets adorned by a gold brooch (part of the jewellery collection he designed). Then there's the high-octane energy, so powered by his unbridled enthusiasm that you get a high even without a sip of Boisset's wines.

But don't let his charismatic and flamboyant image fool you. The astute Burgundian vigneron smartly oversees a global wine empire. Jean-Charles Boisset or JCB (as he is fondly known) is president of Boisset Family Estates with a portfolio of wineries located in the most prestigious terroirs from Burgundy, Rhône Valley and South of France to California's Napa and Sonoma Valleys.

The dozen Burgundy estates include the esteemed Domaine de la Vougeraie and Bouchard Aîné & Fils in Burgundy's Cote d'Or region; the California collection ranges from the historic Buena Vista Winery and Raymond Vineyards to DeLoach Vineyards, Lyeth Estate, Lockwood Vineyard and Amberhill. Then there are wines from Piedmont, Italy, sparkling wine labels from France and Neige, an apple ice wine produced in Québec, Canada. His own brand, the Boisset by Jean-Charles Boisset, takes a terroir approach. The sparkling wines are made in Nuits St Georges, the No 5 series is a portfolio of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Sonoma and Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley.

We meet at Raymond Vineyards, Boisset's 90-acre flagship estate in Napa Valley. Located in the Rutherford appellation it was founded in 1970 by Roy Raymond, Sr. Since Boisset acquired it in 2009, he has expanded Raymond to 300 acres throughout Napa Valley. Boisset's world of wine is

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A selection of Buena Vista wines from Sonoma Valley. Buena Vista was the first winery established in California, later acquired by Jean-Charles Boisset

uninhibited and his bold stroke of showmanship and creativity has turned the Raymond Vineyards estate on its head.

The gardens are dotted with surrealistic art and furniture with plenty more inside. Visitors are welcomed by the Corridor of Senses, a dramatic wall display conveying the colour, smell and texture of wine. The cavernous Crystal Cellar, anchored by a massive Baccarat chandelier, looks like a Parisian nightclub with risqué mannequins dangling from the vaulted ceilings. The educational Rutherford Terroir Room is equipped with soil samples from Napa's 16 sub-appellations. The Library Room, lined with bottles dating back to 1974, offers a rare opportunity to taste older vintages.

Then there's the over-the-top Blending Room that mimics the 1970s New York club, Studio 54, complete with disco ball, neon lights and rockin' music. After you don a silver lamé lab coat and matching beret, you learn the art of blending from experts, and take home your personally crafted blend in a bottle or case with your photo on the label. Last but not least is the Theatre of Nature where, wine glass in hand, you take a self-guided tour of the two-acre educational exhibit of Raymond's organic and bio-dynamic garden.

Raymond's lush Cabernet Sauvignon wines are a testament to the opulent "Rutherford dust". The wines are richly textured with deep flavours and firm structure. Produced with labels such as Generations, District Collection, Family Classic and Reserve Selection, the varietal wines range from Merlot, Syrah, Petite Sirah and Zinfandel to Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.



Photo: Jason Tinacci



Above: The plush Red Room Salon, the perfect setting for serving the Raymond Surrealist (right) a complex, cellar-worthy Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot

We settle in the private Red Room salon with bottle-service. Appointed, as its name indicates, in lush red upholstery, the seductive room is as sensual as the wines we are about to taste. “So, are you a French vigneron in California or a Californian vigneron in France?” I ask.

“What a great question!” Boisset responds with a smile. Before answering, he gets up to change the piped-in elevator style music, which he claims is putting him to sleep (although it’s hard to image Boisset ever sleeping) and switches to rock.

“We are alive again,” he says enthusiastically, settling back in a red velvet armchair. “Well, as you know, I’ve always been a huge believer in one world of wine. It’s not about New World or Old World and it’s not about me being French or Californian,” says this global vintner. “I’ve never really talked about the division of the world. Today it’s very important to think of it as one wine world,” adds the self-proclaimed ‘citizen of the world’. Jean-Charles, however, is a Burgundian at heart, which he defines as being spontaneously passionate about creating top quality. “Wine with a unique sense of vibration and an element of magnetism – I think that’s really the key,” he says.





Top: Jean-Charles Boisset with singer John Legend at the piano. Inset: LVE, Legend Vineyard Exclusive Chardonnay released in 2015

Boisset was born in the village of Vougeot (current population, 181) in Burgundy's exalted appellation, Nuits St George, epicenter of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. His parents, Jean-Claude and Claudine, founded the Jean-Claude Boisset winery in Gevrey-Chambertin and Boisset's childhood was spent between the vines and the cellars. With his sister Nathalie, he united several parcels of the family's vineyards and created Domaine de la Vougeraie including the prestigious monopole of Vougeot Premier Cru Clos Blanc de Vougeot, which was planted in 1110 by the Cistercian monks adjacent to the legendary Château du Clos de Vougeot.

At age 11, the young Jean-Charles made a trip to the US with his grandparents, schoolteachers who wanted him to have a sense of the American spirit by visiting California missions. "On the last day in Sonoma, we visited Buena Vista, the first winery in California," he recalls. "It changed my life. It was a paradigm shift and I dreamed of owning this winery one day." His grandparents purchased a Chardonnay to drink and the exoticism of the wine surprised him. "Grapefruit, pineapple and citrus flavours, very different from Burgundy," he remembers. "I was not aware that America made such great wines."

Back home, he shared his dream to one day acquire Buena Vista for a "period of time", with his sister. "I say period of time because we never own Buena Vista, it's part of the American landscape," he reflects philosophically. "We are here for a period of time. Hopefully, we can enhance its history and pass it on to

generations, because it's the American passport, it's the Mecca, the Taj Mahal, the Vatican of wine."

Boisset's foray into California came in 2003, starting with the acquisition of DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma's Russian River Valley, renowned for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. In 2009 he added Raymond Vineyards and, finally, in 2011 Buena Vista.

Expanding the Boisset empire to California did come with an element of risk, admits Jean-Charles. But for someone who thrives on challenges, he took a "let's do and can do it" attitude. "Irrelevant of the results, I'm willing to produce something with magnetism at the highest level," he says

with determination.

Swirling his glass of 2011 Raymond Red Room wine, a complex cellar-worthy Cabernet Sauvignon with a lush mouthfeel, Boisset notes that it takes hundreds of hours between crafting and blending sessions. No wonder its annual production is a mere 100 cases and can be savoured only in the Red Room salon. Raymond's winemaker, Stephanie Putnam and consultant Philippe Melka are in charge of the winemaking, but Boisset is very much responsible for "styling" the wine and participates in all aspects of tasting and the final blends. "This one I composed," he points at the 2012 Raymond Surrealist, the next wine we taste and a wine that he assures will take us to the highest level of surrealism. It is "our most expensive wine produced in the US."

The \$350 wine comes in an elaborate bottle meant to be saved as a decanter. Silky smooth with well-knit tannins, Surrealist is a 50/50 blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. A limited production of 1,200 numbered bottles, can be accessed through the JCB collector programme. "This is my favorite wine," says Boisset passionately. "This is the wine I'd want to drink if it was my last moment."

Boisset's work life is filled with global travel, but he's also very much a family man. He is married to Gina Gallo of the legendary E & J Gallo Winery founded in 1893. And it's this third generation winemaker who is able to harness her husband's unbridled energy. Like Boisset, Gina Gallo grew up in the vineyards and now as a winemaker oversees the Gallo Signature Series, a portfolio of artisanal small-lot wines produced from prized vineyards in Napa, Sonoma and Monterey County.

So is this a marriage of two dynasties? "I don't know if it's dynasty," says Boisset with his infectious smile. "We've created a lot of fun and passion and excitement in what we do, and we don't cross over in the business whatsoever." But that they do comment on each other's wines, he adds.

The marriage is a perfect balance of yin and yang. She is as publicity shy as he is camera-ready. On a personal level Gina, the quiet introvert, has been a positive influence. "She makes me a little more calm and thoughtful and methodical. Otherwise I would probably be wilder, very impulsive," he says with a hearty laugh. Most importantly, he adds, "She let's me be me. I'm probably uncontrollable, so if you try to control me, I'd end up escaping."

With their four-year old twin daughters, the comfort of family and stability that Gina Gallo has created is what he enjoys most coming home to. "That's the great advantage of having a fantastic, talented, companion and wife."

The Boisset wine world is evolving into wine lifestyle. The newest addition is JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset, an eye-popping luxury wine and culinary tasting salon and boutique opened in Yountville, Napa Valley. Boisset is also collaborating with celebrities such as John Legend, the Grammy and Oscar-winning singer-songwriter. The LVE brand (Legend Vineyard Exclusive) of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay are produced at Raymond Vineyards and were released in 2015.

Jean-Charles Boisset and his American wife Gina Gallo, a third generation winemaker



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Has he seen an evolution in the style of wines in Napa Valley? “The future of Napa lies with more feminine and eloquent, but also powerful wines, with balance.” He reflects that a wine should be powered by its personality and not alcohol level. “People don’t want to have two glasses and fall asleep, or have wine that is overwhelming with food,” he says.

For the Franco-American vigneron, there are no boundaries or limits in crafting top wines and creating unique experiences. “Whether I’m French or American,” Boisset comments, “the beauty is that in a true sense, I’m a combination of both, one half is French and the other is Californian. Vertically or horizontally, depends on the day and the moment!”

BEFORE THERE WAS A CALIFORNIA IN THE WORLD OF WINE. THERE WAS BUENA VISTA

The self-proclaimed “Count” had a grand vision for producing wine and Buena Vista became his viticultural laboratory

Buena Vista winery was founded in 1857 in the town of Sonoma by Hungarian settler Agoston Haraszthy. While others were panning for gold in California, he was on a search for purple gold. The self-proclaimed “Count”, was of noble birth. He had a grand vision for producing wine and Buena Vista became his viticultural laboratory.

The Count pioneered the concept of gravity flow winery in California, excavated the first wine caves and experimented with Redwood barrels for ageing and fermenting. In 1863, he created the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society (BVVS) a first of its kind association.

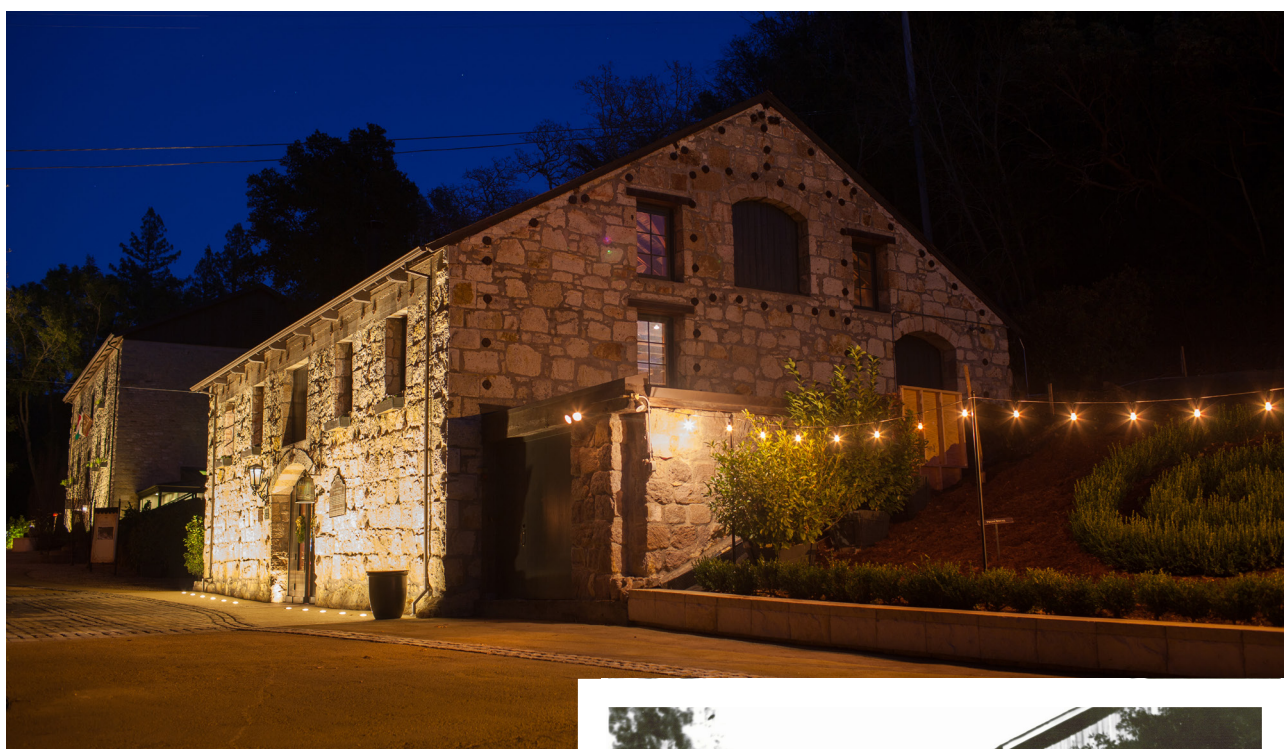
“He was at the beginning of viticulture in America,” commented Jean-Charles Boisset of the visionary Count. “He went back to Europe and brought back 360 vines of Cabernet, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Gruner Veltliner, you name it.”

The adventurous Count met an unfortunate death in 1869 while crossing an alligator-infested stream in the jungles of Nicaragua. Despite Buena Vista’s success and a recipient of numerous international awards, the winery succumbed to financial pressures of the late 1800s and production stopped. Both the winery and the Buena Vista Vinicultural Society were auctioned off in 1878.

By the early 1900s, phylloxera followed by Prohibition ended the commercial activities of Buena Vista as well as numerous other wineries in California. The industry, later revived by the new wave of immigrants post World War II, brought new life to California vineyards.

In 1943 the neglected Buena Vista property was acquired by the Bartholomew family and, with the help of noted winemaker André Tchelistcheff, the winery regained its glory days and released the first post-Prohibition vintage in 1949. Over time, the winery went through several owners until the Boisset Family acquired it in 2011.

In keeping with the Count’s vision, Jean-Charles Boisset embarked on a



Top: Buena Vista Winery at night. Above:
Buena Vista Champagne Cellar 1865

four-year extensive renovation programme, restoring the historic winery to its original grandeur.

Closed for 20 years, the Champagne Cellars are now open to the public. The stone winery building has been seismically retro-fitted by the innovative technique of Central Core Drilling, among other modern upgrades. In 2013, Buena Vista received the California Preservation Design Award for “Craftsmanship/Preservation/Technology.”

Owing to Boisset’s passion for theatricality, the Count himself has been resurrected by theatre actor George Webber. Dressed as a nobleman, the faux Count regales visitors with the estate’s history and grandeur as they taste exclusive, current release wines, explore the Champagne Cellars and experience the audio-visual presentation of the wine tool museum.

The Buena Vista Estate wines are produced from vineyards surrounding the winery, additional fruit is sourced from prized Sonoma and Napa Valley vineyards with long term partnerships with growers. Under the direction of winemaker Brian Maloney and consulting winemaker David Ramey, Buena Vista wines’ diversity is reflected across a six-tiered portfolio. These are elegant Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the Carneros bottling, bold Petite Sirah and Zinfandel from the Count, Sheriff of Buena Vista labels, lush Cabernet Sauvignon in the Private Reserve, and sparkling wine and Sherry from the Heritage Collection. ❖