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### Jean-Charles Boisset: The James C Bond '69 from Burgundy

Nov 03: Jean-Claude Boisset has been selling volume wines from Burgundy and South of France for over 50 years quite successfully but has been quietly undergoing a change over and is increasingly known for quality wines unlike in India where the old image of low-end wines perhaps still remains, writes Subhash Arora who met the founder's son Jean Charles Boisset of JC Boisset in Hong Kong recently where he visited to judge at the annual HKIWSC



I met Jean-Charles Boisset, son of the well known Burgundy producer Jean Claude Boisset accidentally in Hong Kong where I had gone to judge at Cathay Pacific Hong Kong International Wine and Spirits Competition (HKIWSC). I was invited to a private dinner at the residence of Debra Meiburg MW, Chairperson of the prestigious wine and spirits competition in Hong Kong. She and her husband Patrick Siewert had invited him and a group of Americans and me. The range of wines from his JCB Collection pleasantly surprised and impressed me.

#### Man who came to Dinner with JCB Wines

Jean-Charles was very warm, affectionate and passionate about the wines-all of which he had shipped from his wineries as a part of the dinner cooked by Patrick, admittedly a master in cooking. The dinner was part of a recently held Auction Award in Sonoma where 'Lot 29' had been won by the world's renowned motivational speaker and author Robert Kiyosaki and his wife Kim at the closing bid of \$ US130,000. The super-deluxe Hong Kong dream trip was a part of the Award co-chaired by Boisset and the wine producer Joe Anderson of Benovia winery, who was also a part of the trip and the evening.

While pouring wines and chatting during the evening, JCB charmed everyone with his wit and could have easily passed for a French movie star. What would it give away were his eyes that lit up every time he opened a new bottle from his JCB Collections and he spoke gloriously about the labels and the stories behind each of the numbers; every wine had some number with it.

#### The Number Puzzle

For instance, we started with JCB **No. 21 Crémant de Bourgogne**, followed by the delicious JCB **No. 69 Crémant de Bourgogne Rosé**. As he explained, JCB 69 Cremant Rose NV was a Burgundy produced sparkler with Pinot Noir where the number 69 signified merely the year he was born! JCB No. 33 Chardonnay served next was followed by **Domaine de la Vougeraie Vougeot 1er Cru Clos Blanc**, JCB **No. 6 Pinot Noir** and JCB **No. 3 Pinot Noir**, each number as confusing as the Penfolds Bin Nos. but delicious and SWAAD nevertheless. (SWAAD is a term coined by me to indicate when a wine is delicious even for the soul and has an exceedingly high instant wow factor).

By the time we were served wines from **Domaine de la Vougeraie- Clos du Prieure, Clos Vougeot, Corton Charlemagne**-some of which sprang out of Debra's personal cellar to showcase, it was clear to me that Jean-Charles was a passionate vintner who wanted to bring out the best in Burgundy and California. I was keen to chat with him later when after a couple of excellent **California Cabs No. 10 and 1** I realised that there was more to Jean-Claude Boisset that had met my palate in India.

#### Surrealist Wine

This was even before tasting the **Surrealist Red Blend** which had a beautiful brooch on the front of the bottle, designed by Jean-Charles himself, as he explained; he designs jewellery as well. In fact he was wearing one such brooch on his jacket lapel as well. 'This is our top wine and we make only 1200 bottles a year with a different brooch signifying every vintage.' His philosophy -'many times we drink excellent wines that leave a very good impression on our mind and emotions, which we like to store in our memory. Surrealist is wine and art and would give that feeling-and the collectible bottle would always remind one of that emotion,' he said. The bottle comes with a crystal Baccarat stopper and can be used as a decanter for a long time. At \$350 it is a luxury product that also showcases one of the best Cabs Napa Valley has to offer in a blend-it has 50% Petit Verdot, balancing the Cabernet.



With Debra Meiburg MW and Kim Kiyosaki

## Born in Burgundy

The 45-year old JCB was born in 1969 in the village of Vougeot with a population of 176 in the house named Vougeraie, a mere 500 meters from Domaine Romanée Conti, he says, and grew on the first floor of the house where his garden was the vineyard. 'My parents had fallen in love and were wondering what to do. They started in 1961 **Jean-Claude Boisset** named after my father who was then all of 18 years old.

Due to limited capital, the fastest way to grow was to buy grapes and get them fermented in a winery somewhere else. My grand-parents from both sides were school-teachers who gave me a solid foundation of values in life and the soil and taught me about what you call Chakras in India and the Chinese Feng Shui. As I grew up with the children of other wine producers of Burgundy, I also learnt to value organic viticulture and the importance of sun, moon and the earth.'

'I learnt about biodynamics very early. My grandmother told me about organic farming. My paternal grandmother taught me the values of the chakras, energy flow. I was lucky to get a sense of values from them-including in natural science.



In reply to my comment that I had found JCB to be mass produced low end wines of Burgundy, he agreed that the wines were earlier of low quality but that's what they could do with the resources they had. 'In 1998-99 my sister **Nathalie** and I decided to start another winery independently. We named it **Domaine de Vougeraie**, after the house we grew up in and thus honouring our parents. We found success with that brand within the first couple of years after the first vintage was out.'

'We make 13,000 cases from 42 appellations in Vougeraie! The best of Burgundy', as he rolls out the names of various appellations that they produce. 'We have 3.5 acres of vines in Vougeot; one of the largest holdings-out of a total of 50 hAs land. We have always been focussed to make something unique.' Most of their vineyards are in Vougeot.

### Changing the face of JCB

But why is it that I have always believed JCB to be a low-end Negociant wine producer? I ask again, 'You had the right impression-I will explain to you why you had it. They were earlier making basic wines only. But in 2000 my sister and I decided we needed to change the JCB winery. We totally revamped the original winery. We were earlier producing 150,000 cases-from all over France. We decided to cut it down to only 20,000 cases.'

'We could change the name of the revamped winery with a totally different philosophy now. But we decided to keep the name as homage to our parents. We were always buying grapes but we moved to buy now from the top grape producers. We hired the winemaker-**Gregory Patriat** who is known as one of the best Pinot Noir winemakers in the world. He joined us with our idea that we would produce the best wines at the revamped winery.

### Image Makeover

'It was a very big decision. We totally restarted with pure wines at the top end, having open top fermentors of 3, 4 and even 6 tons in oval shapes. We were one of the first ones to reintroduce them in Burgundy. We started making unfiltered wine-mainly Cote-de Beaune and Cote de Nuits. Our wines earlier would cost a maximum of €30-now they start at €30 and go up to €300. We make 40 appellations - a great collection! That is why your impression was very correct. I decided that everything should be top notch. Our philosophy paid off and we have been winning medals in the international competitions like International Wine Challenge, Decanter etc. and excellent Reviews by magazines like Wine Spectator.

Thanks to UK, Japan, USA and many European countries, people believed in us and very quickly we became a success in a very short time. We have several wines of only 2000 case volume selling in top restaurants. In the key places it has changed but not as fast as Vougeraie. It took us till 2005 and 2006 to turn around our image. We wanted to prove a vision that we could buy top grapes and could make very good wines like Corton Charlemagne and Chassagne- and we did it.'

### Boisset Collection

'We wanted to have a lot of history and heritage around us so we started buying wineries not competing with each other and with each one focused on some appellation. We bought the 200-year old winery in Chablis, **J. Moreau** in 1997, where we produce only Chablis. **Ropiteau** is another old white wine making winery in Meursault founded in 1848, with great appellations in its portfolio, which we bought.

### Expansion on Fast Track

It took us more than 20 years. My sister, parents and I work together very closely. One of our visions was to be strong in sparkling wines as you noticed on Sunday. **Louis Bouillot** was a winery founded in 1877 in Burgundy and one could find its sparkling wines in fine restaurants in Europe. The first sparkling family-owned wine producer in Burgundy wanted to sell and move on and we bought it in 1995 and it became a key moment for us. We learnt about Champenoise and it was a springboard for us. We expanded in Loir Valley and bought **Grandin**-again Methode Champenoise. Loire is Cabernet Franc. Very diversified now and also in sparkling wines as well.

## Not for Gina alone

One would think that Jean-Charles got entangled in the US Operations after he met **Gina Gallo** and got married to her. Not so, says the denizen of France and US. 'I was always fascinated by the US. I studied in UCLA and University of San Francisco. I was involved in a winery called Lyeth in Alexander Valley which we bought.

'Then we bought **De Loach** in Russian River- very good quality vineyards and a very high quality wine. Started in 1969, it was one of the first wineries making Pinot Noir in Russian River. That's why I approached them. I realised that the parents wanted to sell it so I approached them first in 2003. They have spectacular Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Zinfandel. We carried on with the same philosophy after buying it eventually but we also changed it to organic farming. We also added a Grand Reserve wine which became a benchmark for Russian River wines. The cool weather for Pinot Noir made it like Burgundy. That was our first big entry into Napa Valley.'

'**Raymond Winery** in 2009 was next. It was doing very well, with most of the production being high end wines from 350 Acres in Napa. It was one winery where we were lucky it had several vineyards. The Raymond family wanted to retire. I approached them for 5 years. I felt it had the potential to give even greater wines. So I got a two-woman team of women winemakers- **Stephanie Putnam** and **Kathy George** to turn it around after I bought it. We created blending rooms, theatres, and a great guest house.'

## It's a Family and Fine Affair

'My father is always a part of our decision-making strategies and plans. When Nathlie and I started a separate winery in 1998, my parents said- let us do it. Since it worked, they had more confidence. But neither he nor my sister leaves Burgundy to come to the US. They came for our wedding and came when Gina and I had twins.

I am into fine wines, into making and styling wines. I am involved in promoting too as you noticed on Sunday. Wine is an artistic expression. Wine is lifestyle and art style-a privilege. It is more than a product. It can transform your life and perception.

Every winery I have been involved in, I am guided by history and the meaning. For instance, Raymond has been into wines for 5 generations – even before prohibition. Three generation of Beringer and two of **Raymond**.

## In a Nutshell

The JCB empire spreads across several countries now, including Italy and Canada besides France and US (California). 'We have 24 wineries now and a holding of about 2500 acres. Each winery has a different vision. The meaning is to have a lot of history and heritage. We have a great sense of quality. The wineries could be small-some make as low as 12000 cases only. We sell about 5 million cases all told-4.25 m are from France and about 750,000 cases from California. Then there is the JCB Collection that I sign on each bottle. There is no sense of place for these wines. I pick out the best from Burgundy, Russian River, Sonoma Coast, Napa Valley and St Helena etc. All have small lots of 50 cases to 250 cases collection.'

The group has recently opened a glitzy Tasting room at the **Ritz Carlton** in San Francisco. In **Yountville** they opened a new JCB Tasting Room in September. Both use a lot of **Baccarat** Crystal as do all their wineries in California.

He clarifies that he has no business connection with **Gina Gallo's** wineries. 'We may talk in general about each others' businesses but we are totally independent,' says JCB.

## Indian market

'We have a notional presence in India through **Mukul Mehra** of **Global Tax Free**. We would love to restart and work in a much bigger way. India for us is a virgin market. We know it is a very complex market with each State having its own laws. But it is also a very interesting market. India has the world's biggest consumption of whisky and provides a huge potential for wines in future. We are starting with **Sula** for **Buchard Ainé** and would like to appoint distributors for other brands as well.'

I checked up with **Rajeev Samant** of Sula on my return. He confirmed that a shipment was on its way and they will launch the Burgundy wines sometime in November. Similarly J. Moreau was earlier being imported by **Finewinesmore** who have quit the import business, passing it on to the Indian producer Fratelli which is entering the fray for imported wines as well. **Kapil Sekhri**, Director of **Fratelli** confirms that they intend to carry on with the import of Chablis wines from this winery.

Times are- a- Changin. But for this young James C Bond '69 from Burgundy, every day must bring some new excitement on either side of the Atlantic. To keep up with his expansion and to see the latest, you need to visit [www.Boissetcollection.com](http://www.Boissetcollection.com) or [www.JCBCollection.com](http://www.JCBCollection.com) or [www.JCBWines.com](http://www.JCBWines.com) and you will be directed to various wineries and points of interest including the stay options.

Cheers! Jai Ho!!



with Subhash Arora and Robert Kiyosaki at Peninsula

