

## PREMIUM

## Exclusive: Jean-Charles Boisset interview, plus 11 wines tasted

Known by some as the 'Walt Disney of wine', Jean-Charles Boisset is a global force to be reckoned with, says Jonathan Cristaldi, who speaks to the enigmatic winery group president in California about his many projects and ideas, followed by a tasting of 11 wines from the trans-Atlantic Boisset Collection.



Jonathan Cristaldi

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Jean-Charles Boisset Credit: Boisset Collection

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## Scroll down for tasting notes and scores on 11 wines from the Jean-Charles Boisset portfolio

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The Boissets are the third-largest wine producer in France, and the largest producer in **Burgundy**.

They are regularly listed in the top 25 wine brands by volume in the US. Yet, incredibly, the Boisset expansion into American territory wasn't exactly planned.

In 2007, while courting Gina Gallo, the granddaughter of co-founder Julio Gallo of E&J Gallo Winery, the world's biggest wine company, Boisset learned that Gallo was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. According to Boisset, she told him to move on.

Instead, he moved to a San Francisco apartment to support her throughout her chemotherapy treatments. With Gallo in complete remission by 2008, the couple married in 2009 and in 2011 celebrated the birth of their twin daughters.

Meanwhile, the annexation of American wine properties was well underway. In 2009, looking to complement his Sonoma-based DeLoach estate in the Russian River Valley with a Napa property, Boisset secured Raymond Vineyards in the heart of Rutherford. He immediately set about renovating the winery, initiated organic and biodynamic farming, and enlisted Philippe Melka to consult.

But the crown jewel of his portfolio came with the purchase in 2011 of Buena Vista – California's first bonded winery, founded in 1857. David Ramey was the consulting winemaker from 2012 to 2018 and, at present, Brian Maloney runs the cellars, producing more than 50 different wines of all varieties and styles, retailing from \$28 to a \$250 a bottle.



The caves of Buena Vista winery

That's just the tip of the iceberg.

In the past decade, Boisset has initiated a barrage of projects. In 2013, he bought Ticen Ranch, which allowed him to pave a new entrance to Raymond from a coveted position on Highway 29, and which he dubbed 'The Avenue of the Senses' in a nod to the 'Corridor of Senses' at Raymond, and certainly as a nod to his mind-bending book *The Alchemy of the Senses* (\$395).



Raymond Vineyards' 'corridor of senses'.

And in Yountville, the JCB Village sprung up in phases beginning in 2016, housing the JCB Tasting Salon and Senses by JCB, a boutique that showcases a line of highly aromatic fragrances and haute-couture fashion that mirror Boisset's individual flair for the kind of flamboyant wine lifestyle he's come to represent.

## The master empire builder

'Many people say "you're the Walt Disney of wine", and I say, "I'll take that as a compliment",' Boisset told me from his office in Yountville, above the Senses boutique.

In fact, he's a lot more private than anybody knows and a lot more cerebral. But there is the outlandish and extravagant disrupter personality that he puts out in the world. 'I have two sides of me,' he contends, reflecting on his more rational self. 'I think I'm maybe a twin...'

Two Boissets or not, he sees one big problem with other oversized personalities flooding the American wine scene. 'People are rushing in because they see a financial opportunity,' he explains. But for Boisset, 'it's not about the money – we're all about art, we're about luxury, we're about the expression of style. It cannot be derived purely by finance.'

But he is extremely bullish about is the general quality of the wines in the US. 'I want the world to be on their knees for American and California wines,' he says. 'The Americans have a greater history [than France] because they've achieved a lot more in a short period of time,' he exclaims, slapping the table hard with his hand as if attempting to send tremors from Yountville to the banks of the Dordogne and Beaune.

He runs an excellent business, centred around a theme he is a zealot about: history. Take the 1881 Museum. In 2018, Boisset bought the Oakville Grocery and transformed the adjoining victorian house into a museum showcasing the appellations and history of Napa Valley. The exhibits include a comprehensive collection of winemaking relics, a Founders Gallery detailing the lives of Napa's pioneers, and 50 wines by the glass, with taste profiles from Napa's 16 sub-appellations.



The 1881 tasting room and museum

But his penchant for history is on full display at Buena Vista. Acquired in 2011, completely renovated, restored, and retrofitted for earthquake protection, the upper floor of the old Champagne cellar was transformed into a 558-square-metre Museum of Wine that has no American rival.

‘We are the shareholders of the past and of the Count’s vision,’ he says, speaking of the Hungarian Count Agoston Haraszthy who established the winery in 1857. ‘We’re drawn by history because history anchors the future and allows the present to vibrate with greater content and greater foundation.’

And practically vibrating with life and energy is LVE Collection, Boisset’s collaboration with Grammy award-winning musician John Legend. When asked why Legend, an avid collector of Napa Valley wines, chose to create the partnership, he says his goal was to produce wines that are ‘soulful, elegant, complex and seductive’, and points to the Boisset family’s ‘long history of award-winning wines known for beautiful balance, finesse and power’.

But they connected on an emotional level too. ‘Wine, like music, takes people on a journey of the sense and the emotions, and we knew together we could create that journey.’



John Legend and Jean-Charles Boisset – LVE: Legend Vineyard Exclusive

## Wine philosophy: in and out of the glass

‘I want to engage people to think and feel differently,’ says Boisset. ‘A lot of the things here [in Napa Valley] are always the same, from Restoration Hardware to some giant wooden table. I’m not into uniformity. Everything I design has a double purpose; beauty and spirit, the mind and the senses.’

That distinct Boisset passion for arousing the senses can literally be felt when stepping out of an 30°C (86°F) day in Yountville to the imminently cool JCB Tasting Salon – it feels almost like trespassing into the private quarters of a more eccentric Hugh Heffner or more outlandish James Bond.

There’s plenty of leopard print and intricate chandeliers to distract from the jewellery, decanters and line of \$380 Baccarat wine glasses – all items that Boisset designed himself.



JCB Tasting Lounge, San Francisco

As for the wine style? If there is a through-line it's more intellectual than it is obvious. 'I start with the emotions I want to create,' explains Boisset, 'the feeling I want you to have, and then I design the wine from the approach to the palate, to the mid-palate, to the length. I work backward on a 20-point basis of those five parameters, and I'm very analytical.'

Perhaps that philosophy is best exemplified in the coveted No. 3, the Franco-American blend he created (just 200 cases) and served at his wedding in 2009, and which we were sipping during the interview. It's a sensual, rich, dark-fruited and textured blend of Nuits-St-Georges Premier Cru and Chambolle-Musigny grapes, with Russian River Valley fruit from DeLoach. It's not quite French and it's not quite American. It possesses qualities of both: earth, ripe fruit, elegance, power, and seems to inhabit the same space that Boisset has carved out for himself. It's his own 'Entre-Deux-Mers'.

## Boisset's 'forever' legacy

'We're here to build forever,' says Boisset, reflecting on his legacy in America. 'It's for the generations to come.' And indeed, the building continues – physically and virtually.

On the virtual side, in March of 2020, Boisset debuted JCB Live, an online show in which he hosts tastings and interviews with everyone from wine country to the food community, and more besides. The show caught the attention of the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA), which took note of Boisset's monetary donations for out-of-work sommeliers and to the Association of African American Vintners Scholarship Fund and Wine Unify. The CSWA gave Boisset the Community Award Green Medal for his efforts.

On the physical front, Boisset has recently closed on a new luxury hotel called the Ink House – an iconic Victorian building west of Highway 29 and across from the new entrance to Raymond. In October 2021, the Buena Vista Tasting Room will open on First Street in downtown Napa in the historic Gordon Building.

Boisset confidentially shared with me that he's working on a project to develop a distillery, microbrewery, and deli at the historic Calistoga train depot.

Finally, part of the 2015 acquisition of Bartolucci Vineyard in St Helena, (now named Founder's Ranch) included one of the area's oldest barns, dating to 1875 – a barn that will become 'a viticultural vision of organic and biodynamic farming' explains Boisset, essentially one-upping his current 0.6-hectare 'Theater of Nature' outside the entrance to the Raymond tasting room.



Founder's Ranch, established in the heart of Napa Valley.

‘The message is respect history, understand history, value history, relate to the past, bring the present to what it is, and transcend it to the future,’ he says, tipping back the last ounce of No. 3 Pinot Noir along with a spoonful of JCB Collection Caviar, before darting out the door to officiate a wedding.

## The spoken word – Jean-Charles Boisset of Boisset Collection:

**On the iconic Oakville Grocery:** ‘Our vision was the history of food, which we’ve rewritten, because now it’s moving into mostly organic, phenomenal purveyors. You can have a coffee in the morning, a beer in the afternoon and great wine in the evening. And then all our friends from the Napa Valley are represented in the hundreds of labels available on our retail shelves.’



Oakville Grocery

**On alchemy of the senses:** 'I design the world I want to live in, and I'm living my dream as Dali did in his painting; everywhere I want you to look, I want you to be engaged and challenged into seeing something you've never seen before, or seeing something that I'm thinking.'

**On Pinot Noir from Russian River:** 'I think Russian River has the richness, the power, the aromatics, the seductiveness, the flamboyance, as well the opulence of what a wine needs – it has the mid-palate and the length.'

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## Reviews of Jean-Charles Boisset wines from the US and France

JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset, Passion Brut, Napa Valley, Los Carneros, California, 2013

[+ Add to My Wines](#)



This 100% Pinot Noir from Los Carneros was aged 28 months on the lees, originally bottled to capture the brilliance and longevity of the 2013 vintage. After eight years, it shows elegant, fine beading...

Points 95

## Domaine de la Vougeraie, Clos du Prieuré Monopole, Vougeot, Burgundy, 2018

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Pale gold in colour, offering heady lemon curd, toasty oak and flinty aromas. Generous on entry, revealing salted lemon peel, candied ginger, and quince with firm, yet juicy acidity and a fantastic long finish marked by a distinct crushed-stone minerality. Grapes come...

Points 94



## Buena Vista, Chardonnay, Carneros, California, 2019

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Ripe, tropical fruit notes of kiwi, pear, lemon and wet slate. This is broad and mouth-filling with zippy acidity and a generous dollop of sweet, toasty oak and crushed almonds. It finishes long with burnt caramel accents and a vein of minerality. Buena Vista is the crow...

Points 91



## JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset, No. 1, Napa Valley, California, 2015

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This 100% Cabernet Sauvignon is immediately seductive, revealing heady brown spices, perfumed purple florals, sweet cedar and elegant tobacco accents. Nothing shy here. A positively silken texture, laced with creamy blackberry and black cherry fruit, brown-suga...

Points 97



DeLoach, Estate, Sonoma County, Russian River Valley,  
California, 2015

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Medium ruby-garnet colour. This has sumptuous, spicy aromas of damson plum, black cherry, earth and underbrush. A well-endowed Pinot Noir, coating the palate with concentrated black cherry, spiced plum, and a tapestry of fine cedar-like tannins and exot...

Points 95



## JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset, Restrained, Napa Valley, California, 2016

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A deep ruby colour immediately gives way to the dark fruit and savoury spices that mark the near-perfect 2016 vintage in Napa Valley. Blackberry and mulling spices lift out of the glass, with hints of black olive and underbrush. Lucious boysenberry and cranberry fruit...

Points 94



## Raymond Vineyards, Reserve, Napa Valley, California, 2018

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Having spent 19 months in 37% new French oak, this Raymond Reserve includes grapes harvested from Oakville, Rutherford, and St. Helena and delivers a potent glassful of voluptuous spice-dusted blackberry fruit, a hint of caramel and cocoa nibs. It's full-bodie...

Points 93



## 1881 Napa, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California, 2018

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An opaque ruby colour. Sweet and seductive dark berry aromas are framed by a bouquet of oak, caramel, and dried coconut. Decadent, rich, and full-bodied with silken, juicy, just-picked farmer's market blackberry fruit and overripe plum, finding a cherry liqueur and...

Points 92



## Buena Vista, Napa Valley, California, 2018

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Deep ruby colour. Fabulous dusty red berry and dark cocoa powder notes leap from the glass. Medium-bodied, a panoply of sweet red berry fruit awakens the senses, framed by finely-grained tannins with exceptional grip. A medium-length finish is punctuated by...

Points 91



## Bonpas, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Rhône, France, 2017

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From the Boisset family's estate in the southern Rhône, close to Avignon and overlooking the Durance River, this blend of Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre shows a lucid ruby-garnet in the glass, revealing vivid garrigue scents, fired clay, rose petal, and cherry aromas....

Points 91



## Jean-Claude Boisset, Les Ursulines, Bourgogne, 2019

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Light-to-medium ruby colour with dusty cherry aromas alongside roasted coffee beans and red floral notes. A rush of sweet red berry flavours and brown spices flood the senses, framed by tangy acidity, while a lightly-structured palate feel leads to a tart cranberry...

Points 90



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