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A taste for change

With the launch of JCB Unity, a Franco-American winemaker embarks on a mission

CHRISTOPHER WATERS

WATERS ON WINE



Hailed as a showman, impresario and bon vivant, winemaker Jean-Charles Boisset stands out in a crowd. The flamboyant personality with a penchant for luxurious fabrics and animal prints has a flair for the dramatic that extends to his growing empire of wineries in California.

Boisset says a trip to wine country should be an escape – an opportunity to dream. A visit to a winery should make one feel excited and energized while providing an unforgettable visit and amazing wines, which is why he has conjured different experiences at Raymond Vineyards in Napa, Buena Vista in Sonoma and, a recent addition, Elizabeth Spencer Winery, a producer of small-batch wines from Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino that operates out of a circa 1872 post office in the Napa Valley town of Rutherford.

And now he's investing in a vision beyond the vines.

"We really need to use wine more as a communication of messages," Boisset explained from Napa Valley last week during a virtual interview. "We should be more like the fashion world, like designers like Vivienne Westwood or Alexander McQueen, who communicated ideas about the environment and sustainability through their art."

An example of that thinking is a California cabernet that's labelled JCB Unity, which was launched in 2020 in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. Boisset said the brand is meant to promote greater equality and unity in the wine world, with a charitable angle that would support organizations such as the Association of African American Vintners and Wine Unify, which help underserved communities enter the trade. To date more than US\$250,000 has been raised.

JCB Unity expanded with a premium Napa Valley cabernet, produced with grapes grown in St. Helena and Rutherford. As plans took shape for the brand, Boisset and his team decided it should be released under the JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset label instead of singling out one specific winery. That way consumers could be introduced – or reintroduced, as the case may be – to the person who brings these wineries to life.

Traditionally the JCB label has been sported by bottles of premium and luxury wines, including a range of Napa Valley red wine blends named after different animal prints such as Leopard, Snake and Zebra, and an array of numbered wines such as the 19 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, 49 Russian River Valley Chardonnay and 121 Carneros Pinot Noir. Reflective of Boisset's background, JCB features wines made in California and Burgundy and, in some instances, creative blends of the two.

The 2021 vintage of the Unity California cabernet, which is currently available at LCBO outlets, is a blend of cabernet sauvignon with petite sirah and petite verdot. A portion of those sales will benefit Rainbow Railroad, which supports LBGTQ individuals in need, and the Canadian Association of Professional Sommeliers. (Boisset says LCBO sales are expected to raise \$30,000 for those charities.)

Boisset's journey toward the wine industry was jumpstarted in his youth. His father, Jean-Claude Boisset, founded his namesake *négociant* winery in Nuits-Saint-Georges, in France's Burgundy region, in 1961. Jean-Charles, who was born in 1969, grew up playing among the vines in the nearby village of Vougeot.

A visit to California when he was 10 set his sights on living and working in the Golden State. The tour with his French grandparents, both schoolteachers, included stops at the various missions, as well as a fateful visit to Buena Vista Winery. Later at the hotel, Boisset recalls, his grandparents shared a taste of Buena Vista chardonnay.

He would attend high school in the United States, at the French International School in Bethesda, Md., before studying economics and finance at the University of London, followed by postgraduate studies at the University of California.

Boisset and his sister, Nathalie, control the Boisset Collection, a portfolio of international wineries in his native Burgundy, the Rhône Valley and Beaujolais and an ever-expanding interest in California, notably the Napa and Sonoma valleys. (The company also operates brands or wineries in England's Bride Valley, India and Canada, the latter a joint venture with Quebec cider producer Domaine Neige.) Its popular French labels include Jaffelin, Bouchard Ainé et Fils and Mommessin, while the creation of Domaine de la Vougeraie, in 1999, created a home for the family's Burgundy vineyards, which include prestigious sites such as Clos Blanc de Vougeot, which was first planted in 1110 by Cistercian monks.

The first acquisition in California was Lyeth Estates (rhymes with teeth) in Sonoma County in 1999. Then came the pinot noir, chardonnay and zinfandel specialist De Loach in Sonoma County's Russian River Valley in November, 2003, Raymond Vineyards in Napa Valley in August, 2009, and Buena Vista in May, 2011.

Boisset had pursued the purchase of Buena Vista, California's second-oldest winery, for years. By the time he acquired the property and its brand, both had seen better days. The crumbling historic buildings were seemingly held together by ivy. The Buena Vista name no longer held much lustre with consumers. But Boisset still viewed the place with childlike wonder and saw a potential showcase for a history-rich visitor experience.

"Centuries give credibility," he has said

about long histories in the wine business. The purchase was emotional, keying on the symbolism of restoring the historic estate.

Boisset's wineries in California were longstanding operations before being purchased. Under the new ownership, they have been turned into cultural destinations where that history is broadcast along other Boisset values, notably the company's embrace of organic and biodynamic grape growing and winemaking practices.

Raymond Vineyards guests can book 10 different tour options, including a wine-maker-for-a-day package where you craft your own Bordeaux-style red blend, or tastings in the grove, surrounded by the estate's vineyards or Crystal Cellar, the working wine cellar decorated with ornate Baccarat chandeliers.

Other Boisset wineries boast distinctive attractions, including sensory gardens, which have been dubbed the Theatre of Nature and museums boasting wine and other collections related to the unique history of that site.

Boisset's investments in California extend beyond wine. There's the Oakville Grocery, founded in 1881, which makes it the longest continually operating grocery store in California, with locations in Oakville (Napa) and Healdsburg (Sonoma). The Ink House offers luxury accommodations in the circa 1855 home of Theron H. Ink in Napa.

And a continuing project, the restoration and development of California's second-oldest train station, the Calistoga Depot, where a mercantile and wine shop will be joined by a distillery that will feature spirits and barrel tastings, as well as crafted cocktails. Other attractions are taking shape outside the building, where converted railcars will house a variety of shops and restaurants for locals and tourists to enjoy while drinking in the rich history of the setting.

Wine brings us together, Boisset says. "It's all about community, irrelevant of your skin colour, religion, preference of life – everyone's welcome."

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