

Raymond Winery: One of Napa Valley's Great Estates

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BY STEFAN PINTO



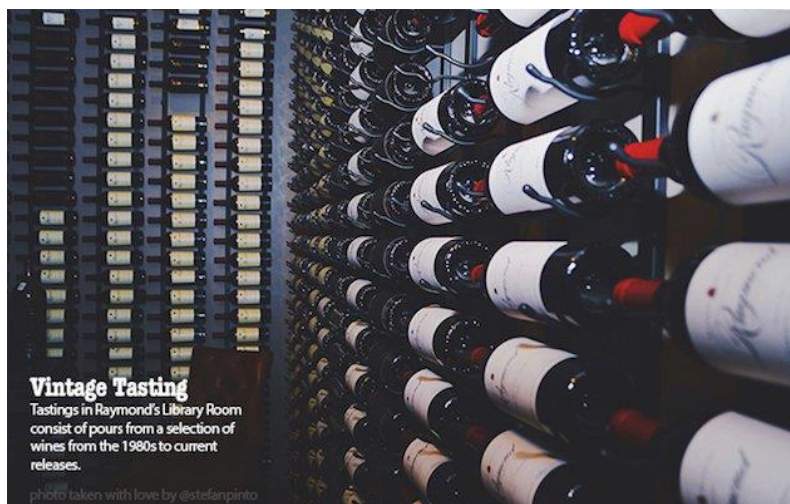
Stefan Pinto's journey through Napa's off-the-beaten-path wineries continues with Raymond, a French-inspired wonderland decked out in mannequins, crystal, and, of course, wine.

There's something I need to tell you.

Are you sitting down?

... I've been to Raymond before.

It was only once! I swear. We met—for the first time—early last year. Okay, it was twice... if you count this trip... I loved it. I loved every, single, friggin' minute of it and, you know what? I would do it again in a heartbeat.



Vintage Tasting

Tastings in Raymond's Library Room consist of pours from a selection of wines from the 1980s to current releases.

photo taken with love by @stefanpinto

Yes, it was decadent. It was shiny. It was French. There was velvet. And she was red. It was like a dream, only it wasn't.

I savored every pour Gina D poured during that first tasting (Back-story: I met Gina D at the Appellation St. Helena's annual food and wine B.A.S.H. I said "hi" and she said, "I bet you like reds." We've been friends ever since), so when Raymond showed up on my itinerary for this trip, I knew what to expect—I just didn't want it to be the same. I was ready.

Give it to me.

Exquisite Luxury

I already knew about Raymond's famous (possibly infamous) Red Room, but what I didn't know was that the winery would be jam-packed with people. Here's a tip, if you're visiting Napa on a weekend, don't. The wineries are filled with tourists. Granted, most of the wineries I mention in this column are indeed off-the-beaten-path and won't be as crowded as the more popular ones, but in general, Napa is overcrowded on weekends. Raymond was no exception. The winery itself, however, is exceptional.

In 2009, **Raymond Winery** was purchased by Boisset Family Estates. "Who dat," you ask? The name Boisset (pronounced bwah-SAY) belongs to the owners of France's third largest wine group and is one of the top 25 wine producers in the U.S. Jean-Charles Boisset owns Boisset Family Estates. I suppose you can say, Jean-Charles and his wife, Gina Gallo (yes the Gallo as in, America's largest winery), like wine, almost as much as they like glamour. Listen, I do too!



What to Do First

It depends. If you're the emotional type, upon entering, I would make a right, and head directly into the Crystal Cellar. Raymond Winery consists of several themed rooms, each entirely different, all capable of evoking different feelings. I suppose it really does depend on what you're in the mood for. The Crystal Cellar reminded me of Pour Vous, a Parisian cocktail lounge in Los Angeles—except Raymond's was bigger. Pour Vous has live burlesque dancers and, although Raymond doesn't (yet), they do have something similar. Colorful, beguiling mannequins hang all around the Crystal Cellar, complimenting the Baccarat crystal chandelier and the stainless steel walls. Furthermore, the mirrored tasting bar serves as a gentle reminder that life is meant to be enjoyed, if not reflected upon—or into.

Oh, wait. Back up. I neglected to mention that I was (still) traveling with the people I met on Facebook. These are the people that taught me (cough: the basics) about wine. And since one's wine taste is undeniably subjective—you either like it or you don't—a decent knowledge of wine will only add to your overall enjoyment. Besides, the one Facebook friend keeps reminding me, "There is no good man that can make you feel sexy, strong and able to take on the world, it is only wine that can do that."



Back to crystal. Our handsome tour guide, Nick, gallantly started our journey not in the Crystal Room but through the Corridor of Senses (Nick saved the Crystal Room for last, it is here, he ended our fantastic voyage with a bottle of Raymond's LVE Cabernet Sauvignon, from the John Legend Collection. Awarded Wine Enthusiast's First Wine Star Wine and Culture Award).

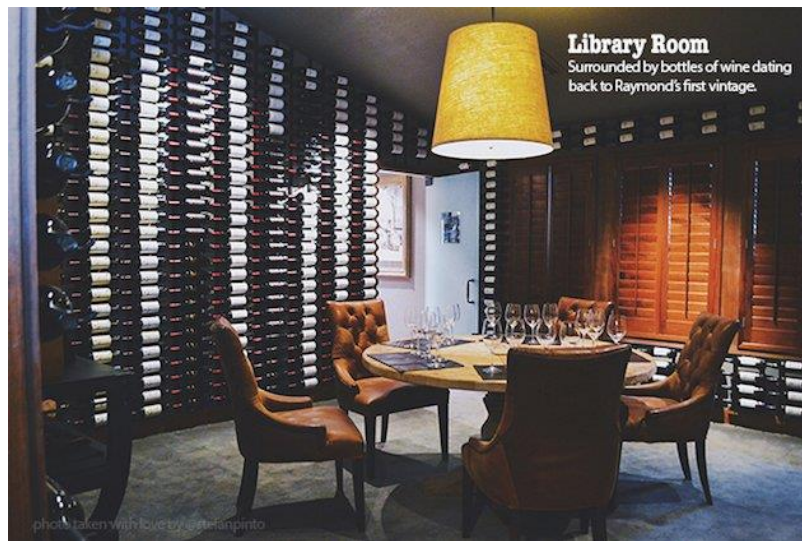


The Corridor of Senses

You know how snobby people smell wine before they drink it? The Corridor of Senses explains why. Through this corridor, guests begin at the Touch Station where they can literally feel how wine can display various textures on the palate. Squeeze the balls (lol), puff comes the vapor, sniff the complex and distinct aromas of wine. This experience is complimentary, and is a must-do activity. Especially while enjoying any wine from the Tasting Room (\$25 per person/\$50 for private tastings—including a full winery tour).

The Library Room

Like me, you probably like to read. There are no books in Raymond's Library Room however. Just wine. Several dating back to Raymond's first vintage. It is in here, guests (up to three) can enjoy tastings consisting of pours from a selection of wines ranging from the 80s up to current releases.



Bottle Service

If you get tipsy... errr, I mean "tired of walking" you can rest in the velvet-ensconced Red Room on any of the red sofas. Frankly, the Red Room is my favorite room at Raymond. Sadly the day of our tour, it was reserved (starts at \$60 and includes a variety of Cabernets). Thankfully, I saved **evidence from my first visit to Raymond**. In all honesty, Raymond's Red Room is a relaxing and delightful experience, especially if it's the end of the day and you just want to drink wine with friends, or substitutes for friends.



Gosh, in the midst of all the excitement, I neglected to inquire about you. Did your mom ever make wine while you were growing up? Mine did. And much to my delight, Raymond has a Blending Room. It is in here you can live the dream (or at least reminisce) on what it is like to be Winemaker for a Day. This activity teaches you the art of blending your own Napa Valley Bordeaux-style red wine! What exactly is a Bordeaux-style red wine? It's a Bordeaux wine (red wine blend) produced in the Bordeaux region of France. And, unless your winery has been **grandfathered in**, you can't call your red blend a Bordeaux (same with **Champagne**), so some wineries will either invent a name for their red blend or in your case, after making your own wine, simply tell people it is Bordeaux-ish.

The Wines

Some notable Raymond wines of distinction: an On-Premise Exclusive Sommelier Selection Cabernet. Offered only to restaurants and hotels, each vintage is blended at Raymond by sommeliers in collaboration with Stephanie Putnam (winemaker) and Jean-Charles Boisset. Ideal for pairings.

A limited production of Cabernets, Raymond's District Collection Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon showcases the unique soil and growing conditions of many Napa Valley appellations. The District Collection highlights the remarkable differentiation that occurs in Napa's micro-climates.



Pairings

Raymond Winery offers several wine and culinary experiences including wine and food pairings.

photo taken with love by @stefanpinto

Raymond's Generations is the pinnacle of Raymond's Cabernet prowess. It is a 100% "cab" reflecting extended aging in tight-grained Nevers French oak.

Although Raymond touts itself as a "classic winery undergoing a modern-day renaissance," I would beg to differ. The appeal of Raymond is its theatre. Their wines are indeed charismatic and seductive, adjectives more likely to lure a younger generation of fledgling wine aficionados who seek to experience an immersive experience meant to dazzle all five senses.

Raymond is located in the heart of Napa Valley. Best to call ahead to make a reservation. [Here](#) is a link to Raymond's website.

Come back next week when I take you on a tour of a winery that also serves as a rustic art gallery! Blackbird... "blackbird singing in the dead of night. Take these broken wings and learn to fly."

In the meantime, catch up on my first two stops: [Tres Sabores](#) and [Checkerboard](#).



Inside the Red Room

Photographer and male model, Stefan Pinto, steals a moment inside Raymond Winery's famous Red Room.