

WINE ENTHUSIAST

LVE & Love: An Exclusive Interview with John Legend

The songwriter and performer sat down with Wine Enthusiast to talk about his new wine project and partnering with Jean-Charles Boisset, proprietor of Boisset Collection.

BY VIRGINIE BOONE



John Legend is best known for the huge romantic hit, “All of Me,” inspired by his wife, model Chrissy Teigen; and the song “Glory,” written and performed with rapper Common for the movie *Selma*. He’s also a tireless musical collaborator.

In 2013, Legend took that spirit of teamwork to the world of wine, reaching out to Jean-Charles Boisset, owner of **Raymond Vineyards** in Napa Valley, to make a **Cabernet Sauvignon**. Their efforts were recognized earlier this year with the first-ever Wine and Culture Wine Star Award from *Wine Enthusiast*. The two followed that first wine, called **Legend Vineyard Exclusive**, or LVE, with a 2014 **Chardonnay**. We talked with Legend recently in the Napa Valley about his love of wine and food, cooking with Teigen at home, and with him and Boisset about their new wine venture.

When did you first start falling in love with wine?

JL: I’ve been drinking wine for quite a long time—since I started drinking—and I’ve always loved wine, always loved the memories I’ve had with great wine, the great meals, the great experiences, the great conversations. I’ve always associated my personality, my music, with those good feelings, and I’ve always thought it would be great to develop something like this, a new wine brand that would tie all those emotions and sensibilities together.

Are there memorable bottles that spoke to you early on? Regions you prefer?

JL: I've always loved a good Cabernet, and that's why I've always been interested in doing that. I love the **Napa Valley** area, but also we've traveled around the world, gone to some of the best restaurants in the world, visited some great vineyards around the world, from the Bordeaux region in France to Tuscany in Italy, and we've had great wines. So many of my good memories, so many of my good trips I associate with great wines.

How do you incorporate wine into your lifestyle?

JL: Well, wine's a part of my lifestyle pretty much all the time [laughs]. I have at least a glass a day—they say that's healthy anyway, right? And it really puts me in a good mood. It kind of settles me, relaxes me, and it's a big part of my life and I'm excited to finally have one with my name on it.

Your wife, Chrissy Teigen, is a noted home chef and foodie, whose book, *Cravings*, just came out. What are some of your favorite dishes she makes, and do you usually pair wines with food?

JL: She's made some really wonderful meals for me, some of them are in the book, some of them aren't. I've pretty much tasted everything in the book and some of my favorites, it's just simple stuff like a great roasted chicken and she does some other great chicken dishes like prosciutto-wrapped Boursin-stuffed chicken, which is really wonderful, some great hearty casseroles and pastas, I love all of that stuff. And almost all of it goes really well with wine, and I've had my Cabernet with quite a few of the recipes.

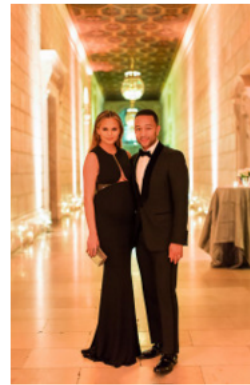


Photo by Scott Rudd

Would it be safe to say wine played a part in your seduction?

JL: Absolutely. Wine was certainly a part of our romance and has been part of our romance ever since.

Jean-Charles, did John's level of knowledge surprise you?

JCB: I was surprised not only by his level of knowledge with wine but more importantly by his incredible, intimate creativity as far as music applied to wine as well. He has a very subtle palate with a lot of nuance and a lot of melody in it. What I felt with John was a long-term partnership commitment.

"I wanted the wines to be something I would love to drink, that I would be proud to give to my friends..." —John Legend

You've released two wines so far, a 2014 Chardonnay and 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon. What did you have in mind when you thought about making a wine that would bear your name?

JL: I wanted the wines to be something I would love to drink, that I would be proud to give to my friends, proud to serve at my home and that I would enjoy myself. I developed a sense for the things I like over the years, and pretty much from the beginning I wanted to do a Chardonnay and a Cabernet. I've grown to enjoy those the most, and I felt like we could develop something I would be proud of.

We came to Raymond Vineyards and we tasted lots of things, and I started to show them the things I gravitated toward the most, the flavors, and we worked on it a lot. I came back multiple times, we spent time blending and bringing out exactly what we wanted the taste of the wines to be. We wanted it to be elegant, soulful, subtle and we wanted it to connect with the musical experiences I give people when I write songs and perform. I think we were able to do that.

JCB: We tasted together numerous times...it was really important for me if anything was to be done besides friendship. We tasted Burgundy, Rhône, south of France, Bordeaux and a lot of wine in the Napa Valley. He knew exactly what he had in mind...and he was very specific in what he was enjoying already and the wines he wanted to drink.

What was the first wine you and Chrissy shared? Or the most memorable wine?

JL: Oh, wow. I don't quite remember the first wine we shared. A lot of wines I remember having with my wife are from great trips we've had and the trip where we really fell in love was in Italy. We were in Lake Como and had some great Chianti during that trip. I definitely remember the meals and the wine we had together during that time, and so many good feelings come up when I think about it.



Photo by Stian Rasmussen; Styling by Shawn Burke

How do you and Chrissy incorporate wine when you entertain?

JL: When we entertain, we almost always serve wine and it's usually the main drink that's drunk. We serve everything else, liquor and beer, but it seems like everyone gravitates to the wine. I think it goes with the whole experience. I make a playlist and we make food and all these things go together. We try to shape the whole experience of the night. I think that's part of why I wanted to develop the wine in the first place, because I'm in the experience-making business. People come to my shows because they want to feel a certain way, they want to connect with each other, they want to feel romantic, feel close to their loved ones and they want a sensual experience that goes with the music. I think the wine really fits with that.

You've said that you wanted to make a series of rich, soulful, complex notes inspired by true love, that the three words most evocative of the wines were seduction, rich and complex. Is wine ultimately romantic to you?

JL: Oh, yes. Wine is definitely romantic. I've always associated wine with romance, and a lot of my fans associate my music with wine and my music with romance, and I feel they all go together. This is the perfect thing for pairing with my music, and I'm glad we were able to create it.

What's the music world like in terms of food and wine? Do other professional musicians at your level take the time to enjoy life, to enjoy wine?

JL: I think we do, especially if you've been in this business for a long time. I think you earn a certain amount of success that gives you the chance to travel just for work, but also you kind of scout trips while you're performing, places you want to go back to on vacation. You get the chance to go to so many great restaurants and other places around the world, and if you choose to, you can really enjoy those things, give yourself a moment to enjoy the fruits of your labor, and that's what I've done. I especially started to do it once I was in love, that connection of being in love and having someone to share it with makes you want to explore the world a bit more, all the senses, and connect with the person you love over great wine, over great food, over beautiful places around the world. A lot of my peers probably do the same thing. But you know, we wanted this to not just be a celebrity wine, we wanted it to be something that we took the taste of very seriously, take the blending process very seriously and wanted to build credibility in the wine world for making something special that wine lovers would love.

There are so many vintners and winemakers in the Napa Valley, and elsewhere, who are serious about music. What in your mind is the connection?

JL: Music and wine go perfectly together. You want to create a great experience, you want to connect with your loved ones, romantically, and music and wine are both there to help that happen. They're social lubricants, they're ways of bringing us together. There's something about that sensual experience of great music, great food, great wine all coming together. I play a lot of events, some of them are concert halls, a packed theater or arena or auditorium, but a lot of events I play are more intimate. I especially think of those events when I think about the kind of music and the kind of wine that go together really well.



Photo by Stian Rasmussen; Styling by Shawn Burke

Jean-Charles, the notion presents itself to make a wine with John Legend, what's the first thing that goes through your mind?

JCB: I love the idea of collaborating with an artist, but I have to collaborate with a very engaged, involved artist. I knew John's music and I knew he had a personality of depth, of sensitivity, high level of emotion, romanticism and a very harmonious feel...I always look for a collaboration if I can learn something which is great along the way and with John, I can tell you, I've learned so much. Not just music naturally, but the intersection of music and wine and its vortex of excitement.

What are these future wines you might make with John Legend?

JCB: We are very focused. The two wines John adored are obviously Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay....I love it because it wasn't necessarily a wine we were already making at Raymond Vineyards or JCB or any of our wineries. He described the wines and I said "Let's do it" and we really played.

We went from the Red Room at Raymond, back to the blending room and to the Red Room, back to the blending room. We did that for weekends. His dedication, devotion to it and commitment to making a great wine was really exciting for me because I'm looking for someone I can not only learn from but create something extraordinary. So we started with those two wines, which are the two benchmarks of what Napa can do greatly, and then it'll evolve. But we'll take our time.

Where can people find the wines?

JCB: We've made a limited edition of the wines, only on the website which is a cool way to introduce the wine as well as in partnership with Fleming's.

You received the first ever Wine and Culture Wine Star Award from the Wine Enthusiast earlier this year. What does it mean to you?

JL: The meaning of wine and culture is very deep...it was very foresightful to think about something which is so important for the future and the next generation in America, wine and culture. Wine is culture, wine is the catalyst of architecture, art, nature, gardening, design, painting, music, acting, everything we can think of, wine is the beginning of culture and often those cultures become greater cultures. We were very honored with this new award because it means a lot to the world at large.

Watch an exclusive behind-the-scenes video featuring John Legend >>

