

*Jean-Charles Boisset is the founder of Boisset Collection, which acquired Raymond Vineyards in 2009.*

*a life in*

RED

*celebrating 50 years of*

RAYMOND  
VINEYARDS



Wines poured at Raymond's 50th anniversary dinner stretched back to its inaugural vintage, 1974.

story by **WANDA MANN** / photos by **ALEXANDER RUBIN**

**RENOWNED** for his sartorial finesse, vintner Jean-Charles Boisset is recognizable by his signature red socks—which are more than a fashion statement; they are a rallying cry. As he puts it, “Red has that power to engage all of us towards energy, action, love.”

The power of that color manifested itself in Boisset's life when he was growing up in Burgundy in a village of 180 people. Describing his upbringing as “conservative” and “traditional,” he says that he dressed in “simple colors—white, blue, brown.” À la Technicolor movie, that all changed when Boisset started playing soccer on the French national soccer team and donned the red socks that formed part of the official uniform. “I said, ‘Maybe I should start wearing red socks outside of the soccer field—let me connect with the earth and have red socks. I love it.’ And that really anchored me, I think, to the energy of the power of the earth. And since then, I’ll always wear red socks.” He only makes an exception for pink in support of breast cancer awareness.

Red certainly rules the day at Raymond Vineyards, a historic wine estate in Napa Valley that Boisset purchased in 2009. From the elegant Cabernet Sauvignon poured in the tasting salon to the lush velvet furnishings in members' lounge Red Room, the hue pulsates throughout the estate.



A rendition of “Le Ban Bourguignon” is a must at any Boisset event.



**Raymond vice president of winemaking Stephanie Putnam with Jean-Charles Boisset.**

Boisset's extensive portfolio of producers spans France and California, but he describes Raymond Vineyards as "a winery that I've always wanted to acquire"—so much so that he spent upwards of six years "courting" the eponymous owners. Why was Boisset so drawn to Raymond? As the progeny of a family involved in viticulture, Boisset felt a connection to "that dynasty of Raymond, which is over five generations of winemakers." The Raymonds had been engaged in winemaking since their arrival in Napa in 1933, and their commitment only deepened when Roy Raymond became entwined with the Beringer family through marriage in 1936. Roy worked as the winemaker for Beringer from 1933 until 1970, when he and his

two sons, Roy Jr. and Walter, embarked on their own path. "The Raymonds kind of created Napa Valley in many ways," said Boisset. "And this is why we kept the name. . . . We believe in history, heritage, and really enhancing the stories of the past into the present and the future."

The Raymonds crushed their first vintage in 1974, and Boisset plans on marking the 50th anniversary in grand fashion with a harvest celebration—specifically a "celebration of the transformation of the fruit within a liquid elixir . . . a gift of God. That's what we love, so we are doing a major fest at that time." He promises that his custom red jacket for the autumn extravaganza "has everything you want to have in a jacket. It's going to be fun."

However, Boisset did not purchase Raymond Vineyards to preserve it like a fossil under amber; he and his team have embarked on a mission to unleash the full potential of their gem. "We expanded the estate in terms of vineyard size, we expanded the very high-end wine programs, and we really recruited an amazing team of winemakers," explained Boisset. Today, Raymond Vineyards has grown beyond its original 90 acres in Rutherford to a total of 170 acres with the addition of two new vineyards in St. Helena.

Another significant change implemented by Boisset was securing Stephanie Putnam as vice president of winemaking and Sophie Drucker as director of winegrowing, a move that would have been virtually unheard of in Napa 50 years ago. "We are extremely high on women running our businesses and women's involvement in the wine world," said Boisset.

Although she had grown up around wine thanks to her enophile parents, Putnam dreamed of becoming an FBI agent. But "unfortunately, there was a height requirement," she says with a laugh. "You had to be 5 foot 2 inches at the time—this was like 30 years ago—and I'm like 4 foot 11." An introductory winemaking class at the University of California, Davis, lit a spark in Putnam, and upon graduating with a degree in fermentation science, she built an impressive career: Before joining Raymond, she spent eight years as winemaker at Far Niente Winery, and before that she was at the Hess Collection, where she rapidly rose through the ranks from cellar worker to winemaker.

Like Boisset, Putnam also felt drawn to Raymond. She and her mom had celebrated her college graduation with a bottle of Raymond, and early in her career, she had considered Raymond a "benchmark" wine and reference point for her winemaking. "When I learned that Jean-Charles had purchased Raymond, I literally wrote him letters. He calls them love letters. They're not," she says with a chuckle. "I wrote him a letter that said no one is going to be more passionate about helping the renaissance of Raymond than I am. Because in order to make something better, you have to have passion, right?"

Putnam started at Raymond about two months after Boisset purchased the winery and immediately began "refreshing the style," in her words. She explains that

“the quality has always been there,” but “softening the touch a little bit, focusing a little bit more on the texture of the wine,” would take it to the next level. “I’m a big believer that wines don’t have to be massive with tannins to be beautiful. Is it seamless from start to finish? That’s what makes a great wine. So that texture, how it comes in the palate and how it kind of flows around the palate, that’s really important.” Boisset and Putnam were in sync on this stylistic score: “We knew we wanted to go softer,” he agrees. “So we focused on drinkability; we focused on the ease of the seduction, the eloquence, and the velvetiness of the wine rather than the power and the alcohol level. . . . We wanted a wine that you would want to have several glasses of and really enjoy an incredible experience.”

Putnam also embraces extended maceration, which she believes makes a “complete wine” because “as the wine sits on its skins post-alcoholic fermentation, it’s kind of building that middle palate, and then it’s lengthening out the tannin.” Finally, her wines are unfiltered “so the purity that we see in the cellar,

we’re letting the consumer experience that as well.” This commitment to purity also extends to the vineyard; Boisset and Putnam started the long conversion to organic viticulture upon their arrival at the winery, which is today certified organic and biodynamic.

Meanwhile, the visitor experience at Raymond Vineyards would be certified dynamic if such a credential existed. In addition to tastings, art classes, and winemaker-for-a-day sessions, Boisset invites visitors to delve into the 2-acre “Theater of Nature,” which is billed as the largest educational display of organic and biodynamic farming in Northern California: “You can literally, with a glass, walk around at your own pace with your pets, your children, your parents, your best friends and just wonder and look at the beautiful landscape,” he says. “Before you taste too much wine, we want you to be engaged in what Mother Nature has to offer.” Signage provides guests with info on the ecosystem, soil, and more. “We’re not here just to sell; we’re here to engage very differently,” he adds. “They buy wine because our business is to sell bottles

of wine, but we want to inspire people. That’s our ultimate goal—to be engaged in the arts, in the beauty of nature.”

Boisset never loses sight of that goal; even when he’s not at the vineyard, his eye is on the magical world he’s nurtured at Raymond—his right eye, specifically. Designed by famed artist Tony Tasset, a giant sculpture of an eyeball, modeled after Boisset’s own right orb, looms large on the Raymond Vineyards estate. For Boisset, the dramatic work conveys a powerful message: “It gives you the vision of Napa, the vision of Raymond, and the future, which is very important to us.”

Boisset’s plans for that sure-to-be red-hot future include launching a new wine from the Rutherford estate that he promises will be “absolutely out of this world”; continuing to enhance the winery’s iconic Generations Cabernet Sauvignon; and pushing further into sustainable practices, including reducing the weight of some of its bottles. In the near term, special anniversary packaging will commemorate Raymond’s first 50 years with a new logo—displayed on a red velvet label, of course. *ST*



*Jean-Charles Boisset greets Andrea Robinson, MS, at Raymond Vineyards’ 50th anniversary dinner.*