

## WINEMUSEUM

# Jean-Charles Boisset's homage to Napa Valley

1881 Napa, the wine history museum recently opened by Jean-Charles Boisset in Napa Valley is a must-see, musr-taste destination. *Mira Advani Honeycutt* reports

California's Napa Valley is certainly a great tourist destination, especially for wine lovers, yet it has lacked the one thing most tourist destinations usually possess – its own museum. This is no longer the case.

Jean-Charles Boisset, the flamboyant yet savvy Napa Valley based French vintner, continues to expand his interests in the wine world and those interests now include the Valley's first wine museum.

In 2019, Boisset not only reached a landmark birthday, celebrating his 50th with much fanfare at Raymond Winery, his 90-acre flagship winery in Napa's Rutherford appellation, he also acquired the historic Oakville Grocery. This local food institution along the busy St Helena Highway has served as a commercial and community centre for nearly 130 years and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. But it was the adjacent Victorian house on the one-acre property that sparked a brainwave. Why not convert it into a Napa Valley museum of wine? Within a half year Boisset did exactly that.

1881 Napa Wine History Museum is more than a museum, though. It's a total wine experience with a lavish tasting salon. The restored Victorian home, originally built in 1874, has retained its original facade, but the interior is uber-glam. In the inimitable Boisset style the decor oozes sparkle, glamour and pizzazz with refined taste.

The now expansive one room space with a mezzanine level is dominated by two dramatic centerpieces, a 48-light Baccarat Crystal Zenith Chandelier and a reproduction of an 1895 canvas map of Napa County draped on the ceiling. An extensive collection of historic wine relics from Europe and the US, plus original artifacts, with over 700 viticulture tools and objects depicting Napa's history through the centuries, add to this museum experience. Fashionable booths are appointed on the main floor. Here visitors can savour special bottlings of 1881 Napa museum wines and take a sensory journey through the valley, tasting Cabernet Sauvignon wines from 12 of Napa's 16 sub-appellations.

Boisset grew up in Burgundy as the son of vintners and grandson of educators. Among his family-owned wineries are such esteemed Burgundy estates as Domaine de la Vougeraie, and Bouchard Aîné et Fils. As the proprietor of the Boisset Collection, he oversees a group of historic and unique wineries and lifestyle destinations with unparalleled passion. The global portfolio includes over 25 prestigious wineries in the world's pre-eminent wine regions from Burgundy and the Rhône Valley in France, to California's Napa and Sonoma regions. In 2018, Boisset partnered with India's Fratelli Vineyards to launch J'Noon

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Clockwise from top: Exterior of 1881 Napa museum, the first wine history museum to open in Napa Valley housed in a historical, Victorian home. 1881 Napa museum opening with Jean-Charles Boisset at the entrance. Interior of the museum looking down from the mezzanine floor at the Baccarat chandelier



Above: A prized hand-pump from the Bordeaux estate of Lafitte Rothschild. Right: A display from an extensive collection of antique winery and vineyard tools



Left: 1881 Napa wines for tasting represent each unique Napa Valley appellation. Above: Descriptive panels of Napa Valley's appellations grace the walls

wines which are distributed in India as well as at Raymond Winery in California.

I caught up on the phone with Boisset a few days after the Museum opened. "I've always dreamt personally of doing an amazing place, a museum which would be a destination where you can learn the history of Napa, its foundation and the founders of the villages [appellations] of Napa," Boisset told me. "We love educating people and promoting wine through education. And we realized no museum existed on the history of wine in Napa Valley."

Boisset mentioned two other museums that he and his family have launched in the past - Imaginarium in Burgundy's Nuits-Saint-Georges region and another at his Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma which focuses on the foundation of Sonoma and Napa wine regions.

Boisset calls a visit to the museum a course in Napa 101, where visitors can dive into the world of each of the terroirs. "Now we have a place where you can compare and contrast the wines of different AVAs and decide what you like." This is a two-hour indulgence offering a horizontal tasting of Cabernet Sauvignon wines from 12 of Napa's

16 appellations at a cool price of \$175.

Alcoves in the interior walls of the museum display soil samples from Napa appellations accompanied by descriptive panels written by noted wine author Karen MacNeil, who also helped develop various tasting options. Tastings such as "Majestic Mountains versus Plush Valley" allow visitors to explore Napa's highly diversified districts. In addition to the site-specific Cabernet Sauvignon wines, there's a selection of specially crafted 1881 Napa bottlings of Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Sparkling and Rosé wines.

A self-guided tour along the museum's mezzanine floor with a wrap-around balcony recounts the history of Napa Valley, its founding fathers and early pioneers along with a robust collection of wine ephemera including historic winemaking, vineyard, nursery and cooperage tools that range from a cooper's mallet and copper sulfate sprayers to pomace cutters, stave presses and *jabloirs*, used to make grooves to fit the top and bottom of barrels. All curated by the Early California

Wine Trade Museum featuring local historic wine artifacts from the collection of Dean Walters and John O'Neill.

Boisset has paid personal attention to the placement of objects. A prized hand-pump from the Bordeaux estate of Lafitte Rothschild is placed by the window that faces Opus One Winery across from the museum. "We put it in the direction of Mouton so that they both look at each other," Boisset points out. (Opus One Winery was a collaboration between Bordeaux's Mouton Rothschild and the Robert Mondavi Winery).

Boisset is proud that his family's rare and historical wine artifacts can be shared with the public. "We have the only two museums on wine in the US," Boisset said, referring to the 5,000 square-foot Buena Vista museum along with the 3,500 square-foot 1881 Napa. "It's a lifetime's collection between my parents, my sister and I. We are extremely dedicated to the history and have invested in the future of the region and future generations. We want to make sure that people not only enjoy wine but learn about the history and culture of wine.

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We really want to make it an insane, fabulous destination, a must-stop place."

Boisset also has plans for the adjacent Oakville Grocery store, one of California's oldest operating stores, that was founded in 1881. It was originally an idyllic spot for bikers, locals and visitors to stop by for a freshly made sandwich or stock-up on fresh eggs and other farm-grown fruits and vegetables. Now, with Boisset's touch, while the facade retains its downtown originality (the iconic Coca-Cola sign remains untouched) the interior has morphed into a sleek gourmet store. Boisset has added an expanded wine experience where shoppers can access 375 local wines and high-end cult Napa labels. He has also expanded the JCB Lounge and Tasting Salon in Napa Valley's tony village of Yountville and added Senses, a boutique dedicated to fashion, beauty and fragrance. "It's exotic," mused Boisset. What's up next on the Boisset acquisition agenda? I ask. "We have a vision for a restaurant, transporting people from wine tasting to retail," said Boisset. "It complements each other well." So stay tuned for more of the Boisset wine lifestyle spreading world wide. ❖