

# The Amateur Gastronomer

In search of the best wine, food and culture



## IT'S TIME FOR WINE: MONSIEUR BOISSET IS HERE TO STAY

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*By Monty and Sara Preiser*

Every so often an individual who seems bigger than life appears on the scene. Unfortunately, they are often pains to watch, listen to, and be around. Yet, if they are affable, bright, creative, down-to-earth, erudite, and fun, then you have someone worth writing about. Jean-Charles Boisset is such a man, and he is making a huge splash in Napa and Sonoma. Already having spurred a decade-ago-declining DeLoach Winery to a present level of excellence in Sonoma, Jean-Charles has now set his sights elsewhere in that county and on the Napa Valley.

Early this summer "Taste of Terroir" opened on the famed downtown square in Healdsburg. A new concept to California as far as we can tell, in this room of unquestioned style and beauty knowledgeable staff stand ready to lead the discerning visitor through various wines of the Boisset portfolio from both Burgundy and California. Designed as a sit down tasting and learning experience (and unique gift shop), the level of the wines tasted understandably depends on the program selected by the visitor, but all the wines offered well represent the superb products being produced by the Boisset group worldwide. And we can go a step further and label this experience in Healdsburg as a "destination event," meaning to us that it is worth the time it takes to travel to the Square from surrounding areas.

The menu offers about six White and fourteen Red Burgundies with retail prices per bottle of \$12 – \$130 (if you are a novice when it comes to wine names, when we speak of Burgundies we speak of French wine – in this case white being Chardonnay and red being Pinot Noir). The five Chardonnays and nine Pinot Noirs (new world countries such as the U.S. generally call wines by their varietal name) range from \$15 – \$75. One chooses from set flight pairings, but the tasting can, with a little foresight, extra funds, and time, be customized to one's desires. Whatever your preference, we can't leave this paragraph without telling you how delicious the single vineyard De Loach Pinot Noirs continue to be – the Maboroshi (\$45), the Green Valley (\$45), the Van der Kamp (\$42), and (our new sometimes favorite – we go back and forth), the Sonoma Stage (\$60).

*Flash:* While visiting Taste of Terroir check out the "barrel to barrel" program, where many of the same beautiful wines we have mentioned can be purchased and savored from a box-in-a-barrel – the perfect storage system that will allow wines to drink like new for weeks. Confused? You won't be once you see the tasting room or research the website.

If you have been to the Napa Valley recently, you may know there is a "new"

**gas · tron · o · my** (noun)

1. the art or science of good eating
2. the study of relationship between culture and food

**gas · tron · o · mer** (noun)

1. a connoisseur of good food and drink

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Raymond Vineyards, but may not know much about it. And it is probably too soon for much specific information about the winery to have blown across this vast country. The most visible change, and one that surprised many Napa watchers and fans, is that the winery was in fact sold.

True, it is always a bit sad when the icons of any industry step away from a business they have not only built, but from one that carries their own name. Fortunately, however, when their retirement is the chosen result of a sale to another company that intends to keep the original name and move the business steadily forward, the change of hands becomes more bittersweet than maudlin, and is a positive step for not only the principals, but the entire community.

Such is the case here, where both Roy and Walter Raymond willingly chose to sell the business to Boisset Family Estates, which is headed by Jean-Charles in the United States. Historically this Group allows each winery within the Boisset collection to keep (and build on) its own unique history, style, and personality – a smart move qualitatively and economically. In this day and age, smaller family wineries often produce terrific wines, yet too often current economic conditions will not allow these small enterprises to continue to invest, grow, and improve. They are, as was Raymond, fortunate if an “angel” with resources is interested enough in the business to purchase it, and then allow the name to be kept and the business to grow. Granted, it takes management skill on the part of the angel to maintain the illusion of a charmingly small winery, but Jean-Charles has proven his ability to do just this time and again.

As is usual with a change of regime, new people arrive and bring new ideas. Near legendary winemaker Philippe Melka stepped in immediately as the new consultant, and the brilliant Stephanie Putnam, late of Far Niente, was engaged as head winemaker. There is little doubt that given the new wine making team and the resolute commitment toward organic and sustainable farming methods inside and out (composting, drip irrigation, cover crops, recycling, using recycled products and rechargeable batteries, etc.), this winery is headed toward top status.

Raymond will still be offering wines for all tastes, and at varying levels of the price ladder. The award winning “**Generations**” (\$85), a limited production 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, will continue to reflect the best of the vineyards. Established not too many years ago, the “**District Terroir**” (\$60-\$75) wines feature 100% Cabs (also in limited production) from fine vineyards in various Napa Appellations (presently the winery offers Rutherford and St. Helena Cabs, but has plans to add an Oakville). The “**Napa Valley Reserve**” (\$16-\$35) wines make up the flagship tier. These include a Cab, a Merlot, a Sauvignon Blanc, and a Chardonnay. New to the winery will be its “**Family Classic**” (\$20) entry-level-steak-lovers Cab, and its “**Sommelier Selection**” (\$10-\$12) soft Cab intended for by-the-glass programs in restaurants. The “**R Collection**” (\$12-\$18) will also live on.

Beyond its wine production, Raymond is in the process of planting demonstration vines and crops that will help teach visitors about the grape varietals being used, and about organic and biodynamic farm practices. Jean-Charles believes in education. And also on the property are a number of other flattering reflections of his love affair with wonder and whimsy.

We were with Jean-Charles a number of times this summer at public and private affairs, both big and small, and have now been able, at least to some degree, to gauge the measure of our new friend. As to wonder, during lunch in the vineyards with just us and his invaluable assistant Michelle Sitton, he demonstrated his personal vision by showing off one of the most stunning vistas in Napa from the middle of the property's valley floor where he had constructed a raised observation stand. This bird's eye view (well, of a bird perched atop a

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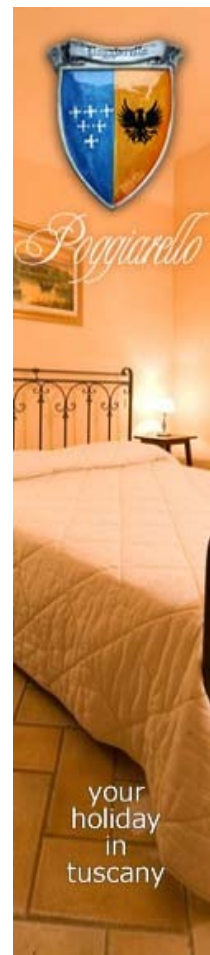
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vine) affords a most remarkable and surprising 360 degree insight – we can't wait to visit during different seasons.

Last week we were pleased to attend the first major Boisset soiree at the winery. Welcoming drinks were poured outside, where picture frames hang as if “out to dry” on clothes lines, and huge “overstuffed” molded chairs invite one to sit and see the winery and, indeed, life, in their own terms. There is whimsy. We then adjourned to the new Baccarat Room for hors d'oeuvres and another reception. But it was the room that took one's breath away, with its eclectic lighting, Baccarat crystal chandeliers, judicious use of mirrors, a Fellini movie playing on one wall, mannequins on swings, and Baccarat decanters atop a retro bar made of chrome. Every glance about revealed some elegant or creative idea of designer quality.

From this awe inspiring setting we moved a few yards to the winery's tank room, where one magnificent table with a surface of mirrors and over 400 glasses was set to receive 70 of us (the table was designed by Jean-Charles for his wedding last year to noted winemaker Gina Gallo). The six course meal and pairings of some of the finest aged Raymond wines (including a phenomenal 1976) was perfect, and the entire experience was nothing short of ethereal.

On a very personal note, Monty lost his Dad just about a year ago. There are not, and never have been, many men with his charisma, charm, education, style, work-ethic, and ability to “get things done.” He walked in a room and owned it. In this way, Jean-Charles reminds us of Stanley Preiser. Once he makes an appearance and puts his stamp on an endeavor, you know it is going to be something more than just worthwhile – it is going to be superlative.

*It's Time for Wine* is a column published by wine writers and educators Monty and Sara Preiser that is featured on the Amateur Gastronomer.

Monty and Sara Preiser reside full time in Palm Beach County, Florida, and spend their summers visiting wineries and studying wines on the west coast where they have a home in Napa. For many years they were the wine columnists for The Boca Raton News, have served as contributors to the South Florida Business Journal, and are now the principal wine writers for Sallys-Place.com. Monty and Sara also publish The Preiser Key to Napa Valley, the most comprehensive guide to wineries and restaurants in the Napa Valley, published every March, July, and November. Click here to read more columns by the Preisers.

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