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Boisset Upgrades Raymond Vineyards

Napa Valley stalwart is now a Biodynamic showcase

by Paul Franson

St. Helena, Calif. -- [Raymond Vineyards](#) has long been an overlooked force in Napa Valley. Established by descendants of a [Beringer Vineyards](#) founder in 1971, it was a solid producer of good wines, including some of the valley's better buys and some excellent high-end wines, but never attracted much attention.



Jean-Charles Boisset

That situation is about to change if extensive efforts by its energetic new French owner, [Jean-Charles Boisset](#) of [Boisset Family Estates](#), pay off. The Raymonds sold the winery to Kirin Holdings Co. in 1988, but stayed on to manage the business. Boisset bought the winery from Kirin.

Boisset, who bought Russian River's 200,000-case [De Loach Vineyards](#) in 2004 and upgraded it, acquired 150,000-case Raymond in August of 2009, and started planning the transformation. "We've been pregnant for nine months, but now we're giving birth," says the exuberant Frenchman.

Among the most visible changes will be to turn the Zinfandel Lane property, just south of St. Helena, into a major destination devoted to explaining Biodynamic grapegrowing. Other growers in Napa Valley practice the controversial regimen, but none have a visitor center focused on the practice.

“We want to show how nature affects wine and why the lunar calendar is important,” Boisset notes. Boisset, who is married to vintner [Gina Gallo](#), is overseeing the planting of herbs and other crops like sunflowers, lavender and corn, and cover crops associated with Biodynamic farming. He’s adding goats, chickens, sheep and bees, equipment for producing the homeopathic “potions” used in the process, and even burying the infamous horns used to produce some preparations in the middle of the herb garden—which is aligned with a round “moon” window on the main winery.

The site will also include a garden of surrealistic sculpture, as well as a creation of empty frames so visitors can find their own view of Napa Valley, Boisset says. He is also planting many trees around the visitor center, including a fruit orchard, and generally upgrading the visitor facilities, including a new 8-foot platform in a vineyard where visitors can get a view of the vines and the valley. Tables in the vineyards will also welcome visitors to commune with the vines.

Boisset is turning a guesthouse into a stage for wine and food pairings and demonstrations, which Napa County has started to allow after years of discouraging them. Inside the tasting facilities, he’s developing a wine education center including a barrel room for tasting and comparison



Stephanie Putnam

Not all the effort is going toward impressing visitors, however. Former president Walter Raymond recommended hiring a young, high-energy winemaker. Boisset brought in respected [Philippe Melka](#) as winemaking consultant starting with last year’s harvest, and hired winemaker [Stephanie Putnam](#) from [Far Niente](#) early this year.

“Raymond was making good and fair wines,” Boisset says.

“My intention is to take it to the next level.” He continues, “A lot of Napa Valley wines are heavy and tannic. We want to bring in a level of elegance.”

Raymond has also added new small tanks for batch fermentation, sorting tables, small vertical presses and other new equipment.

The winery is converting 100 acres of vineyards in St. Helena, Rutherford and Jamieson Canyon to organic growing, too. Overall, the winery has about 350 acres of vineyards in Napa County.

Boisset has brought in other staff, and will be attempting to reach a younger consumer audience. One is Michelle Sitton, who has extensive experience in consumer packed goods. "We want to make wine more accessible," Boisset says, including adding some new lines of wine.



Michelle Sitton

Boisset Family Estates was founded by Jean-Charles' parents, and he now runs it with his sister. They own about 20 wineries, and

produce popular French Rabbit in Tetra Pak cartons as well as more traditional French wines from labels such as Bouchard Aîné & Fils, Domaine de la Vougeraie and Jean-Claude Boisset.

The family owns Lyeth as well as DeLoach and other brands in Sonoma County, and operate a new tasting room called Taste of *Terroir* in Healdsburg, Calif. One of their new ventures is wine on tap from a wooden barrel containing a replaceable bladder of wine.

Meanwhile, Walt Raymond is enjoying traveling; his brother Roy retired some time ago. Other family members remain at the winery. 🙏 [ShareThis](#)

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