

# FRUITFUL VINEYARDS



BY CHRIS SHERMAN

Velvet and a Baccarat chandelier are among the 1920s effects in the storied Red Room, a members-only tasting lounge at Raymond Vineyards in Napa Valley. Owner Jean-Charles Boisset will be a star of the St. Pete Wine Weekend in February.

In only its third year, St. Petersburg's young wine festival already is attracting wine world royalty.

Arriving in February as one of the honored guests of the Museum of Fine Arts' Wine Weekend is no less a grand personage than Jean-Charles Boisset of Napa and Sonoma and Burgundy. Not a true king, perhaps, but as head of Boisset Family Estates, he oversees so many dominions in France and America that he has nearly as many titles as Queen Victoria or a Hapsburg.

Boisset's flag flies over the historic domains of Burgundy and Beaujolais and landmark legends of old California to a parallel planet where rabbits and bulldogs make Earth-friendly wines. So do very young twin girls.

In the process of romancing Napa and Sonoma, he fell in love with Gina Gallo, a true American winemaking princess from one of our own vintner dynasties. And last year they moved into a palace that belonged to Robert Mondavi, another monarch.

Although Boisset would reject a crown, he does see himself as an ambassador for the wine lands of the two countries. Or at the very least, a dashing agent in the service of wine's majesty. Indeed, he favors a smoking jacket, attended the California *Skyfall* premiere and drives an Aston Martin. (The family car is a Maserati

Quattroporte.)

It's in that capacity Boisset comes to St. Petersburg trailing clouds of Art Deco glamor, possibly bringing along his wife and their twins, Honor and Grace. Frenchie, their bulldog, probably will stay at home. Certainly Boisset will bring cases and cases of his family's best wines from top grand cru appellations in Burgundy to include in a grand VIP dinner on Friday night.

Boisset is working on the final details of the feast with friend and fellow Frenchman Dr. Jean-Francois Rossignol and his wife, Patricia, one of the organizers of the museum event and a devotee of Art Deco style.

"It will be the kind of meal you would eat at midnight in Paris," he says. "Or midnight in Tampa Bay."

To a menu of classic 1930s French cuisine, Boisset can choose from a delicious range, the white Burgundy of Chassagne-Montrachet, the reds of Vougeot and Gevry-Chambertin, and on and on.

Boisset enjoys playing a Euro dandy, a lucky wine heir who has become a mega-merchant in his own right. Yet underneath the silk and velvet is a surprisingly earthy love and knowledge of terroir that comes from growing up in Burgundy, the wine region that parses its vineyard geography as finely as possible.



"I grew up in a village of 160 people," he says. "I can't remember my parents ever closing the door." That tiny town is Vougeot in Cote de Nuits, where monks planted the first grapes in chalky silt more than 900 years ago. Wine lovers know it for the walled vineyard of Clos de Vougeot, the largest grand cru on the Cotes, and the village's four premier crus nearby.

From there, Jean-Charles' father branched out across Burgundy, acquiring parcels in dozens of vineyards along the Cote d'Or and into neighboring Beaujolais and beyond to the south. Today Boisset owns Bouchard Aîné et Fils, J. Moreau et Fils in Chablis and many more.

The jewel in the center is still Domaine de la Vougeraie and its grand cru holdings in fabled Bonnes Mares, Musigny, Les Cras and Savigny-les-Beaune.

As the family expanded, Jean-Charles was sent to explore America, carrying a Burgundian's focus on pinot noir. It is the most finicky of red wine grapes, almost impossible to make well in bulk.

When he arrived in California, it was largely cabernet/char-donnay country, but Boisset sought out the few vineyards planted to pinot, with cool climate and calcareous soil to make it good. One of his first purchases was DeLoach, a pinot pioneer in the Russian River section of Sonoma started by a San Francisco firefighter and his wife. He also looked far south to the Santa Lucia mountains in Monterey for the very-cool Lockwood vineyards.

Boisset slowly expanded into cabernet, California's first love, always seeking vineyards and wineries rich in history and proper terroir, like Raymond, started by a beloved family of Napa farmers in Rutherford, and Lyeth in Sonoma, the first California winery to make a Bordeaux-style meritage.

None is more historic than Buena Vista, begun in 1857 by the Hungarian Count Agoston Harazthy, who gave California many of its first grapevine cuttings, including the parent of zinfandel.

Buena Vista is large in Boisset's personal history. When, as an 11-year-old on vacation, he saw its ivy-covered stone winery walls, they made a big impression.

"I fell in love with the place," he says now. "I knew you had an amazing nation."

Boisset was smitten with America and its potential for wine-growing. He returned for secondary school, living with a family friend in Washington, D.C., and again after college for graduate school in California.

In the process, Boisset was infected with an American savvy for marketing and packaging, applied with dynamic energy and a disregard for tradition.

Enter the Frenchie wines, affordable blends named after his bulldog and "good enough to make you drool." At the opposite end of the price spectrum is a full line of extravagant JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset wines, under eponymous initials and carefully numbered blends; the most exalted is No. 3, dedicated to his twin daughters.

Boisset also is an aggressive evangelist and educator about the joys of wine. The aging Buena Vista buildings were returned to historic landmark condition for tourists. The old Raymond property now is something of a red-velvet wine shrine for visitors to taste the grandest cabernets, and a laboratory where they can make their own blends. And JCB has a tasting room and exhibits in an old Healdsburg storefront to teach American

guests the subtleties of terroir.

Most strikingly untraditional are the flock of "Rabbit" wines from both France and California, "bottled" in flexible Tetra Pak, which is lighter, less expensive and more environmentally friendly than glass. Not to mention very cute, so Boisset gets a charge and a chuckle pouring Rabbits into fine stemware.

Could wine come in plastic bottles? Yes, under Boisset's Fog Mountain label.

Reducing glass for Rabbit wines is a small part of Boisset's wide environmental concerns, which stem from both European and Californian consciousness.

"Remember, biodynamics was started by Rudolph Steiner in 1929," he says, and go back generations further. Now DeLoach properties are organic and biodynamic, and the rest are moving toward certification.

DeLoach and the grand crus of Domaine de la Vougeraie have gone the furthest, replacing pesticides and chemical fertilizers



French-born winemaker Jean-Charles Boisset oversees family vineyards in Europe and California. He has also instituted innovative packaging and marketing techniques.



with natural supplements and pest control and a keen appreciation of lunar cycles and natural rhythms.

"In good years and challenging vintages," polite Burgundian for very tough years, "the results are spectacular," Boisset says. They include 2012, a vintage of very low quantity but great quality.

He is convinced that his personal blend of French tradition and love of terroir with American pioneer spirit is not a conglomerate but "a family of families."

It leaves him excited. "I feel like I have two hearts," he says.

Also starring in Wine Weekend, co-sponsored by the museum and its Margaret Acheson Stuart Society, are Shari and Garen Staglin, another of Napa's first couples. The Staglin Family Vineyard on the fabled Rutherford Bench produces rare chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and other reds from certified organic vineyards.

They are in such high demand the wines are largely available only to a select mailing list. The Staglins will be the guests of honor at the grand dinner and live auction at the Renaissance Vinoy Resort that is the centerpiece of the weekend.

The St. Pete Wine Weekend spans three days starting with the Boisset dinner in the Marly Room of the museum on Feb. 8 for event sponsors and VIPs. On Feb. 9, festivities begin at 4:30 p.m. with a tasting and live auction with 50 lots of wine and lifestyle items, followed by a banquet featuring the prized Staglin wines, music and dancing. (Tickets to that event are \$285.) On Sunday, Feb. 10, a French-themed vintners brunch (\$100) will be held at the Vinoy. For information and tickets, see [wineweekendstpete.org](http://wineweekendstpete.org). ○



Ivy covers the stone walls of the historic Champagne Cellar at Buena Vista Winery, the oldest premium winery in California. They impressed Boisset on his first visit, at age 11, and he restored the property after acquiring it last year.

THE MAN, THE IMAGE & THE WORLD

# Henri Cartier-Bresson

## A Retrospective

On view through January 13, 2013

Presented by **Bank of America**



Tampa Museum of Art

Cornelia Corbett Center / 120 W. Gasparilla Plaza  
Tampa, Florida 33602 / [tampamuseum.org](http://tampamuseum.org)



Brussels, Belgium, 1932. © Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos