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MAGAZINE

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2012 AMERICAN WINERY of the Year

...

This Napa Valley icon has been completely remade by swashbuckling Frenchman, Jean-Charles Boisset.

After refashioning DeLoach Vineyards in the Russian River Valley, Jean-Charles Boisset, the Wine Star Award winner for Innovator of the Year in 2009, set his sights on remaking Raymond Vineyards—a longstanding Napa Valley institution that had seen better years—into a talked-about, serious producer of Napa Cabernet Sauvignon.

At Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena, Boisset has added the Theater of Nature, a two-acre educational exhibit about biodynamic farming. He also introduced The Red Room, a swank, velvet-swathed *Mad Men*-era tasting lounge with a pool table and pinball machine; the Crystal Cellar, a separate luxe entertaining space with a Baccarat crystal

chandelier; and Frenchie, a tasting room for dogs.

“Through the Theater of Nature we have the opportunity to bring our guests into the natural beauty of the Napa Valley,” says Boisset, “helping them understand that we are each and all together actors on a grander stage.”

It’s all part of the charismatic Frenchman’s master plan to conquer the wine world in a new way, making wines from historic properties whilst blowing up the staid status quo of wine tourism.

Boisset grew up in Burgundy among the vineyards of Côte de Nuits and began working in the family wine business as a teenager. He now leads his family’s handful of vineyard and winery interests in North America, and has been an instrumental force behind the rise of Boisset Family

Estates as one of the world’s largest wine companies.

As a boy, Boisset fell in love with the Napa Valley and Raymond’s own multigenerational family story, beginning with Roy Raymond, who started his wine career at Beringer in 1933, working the first crush after Prohibition’s repeal. Raymond went on to found Raymond Vineyards after retiring from Beringer in 1970, buying 90 acres south of St. Helena and building a winery.

Following its first harvest in 1974, Raymond was producing 35,000 cases a year when Kirin Brewery in Japan bought a controlling interest in 1989. During that era, with Roy’s sons—Roy Jr. and Walter—running things, the winery’s acreage expanded from 90 to 310 acres, with an annual production of 200,000 cases.

Sensing a diamond in the rough, Boisset bought out Ki-

rin in 2009, hiring Far Niente’s Stephanie Putnam as director of winemaking and bringing on Philippe Melka as a consultant.

At this point, Raymond was harvesting fruit from estate vineyards in St. Helena, Rutherford and Jameson Canyon, which have been regrafted or replanted and transitioned into organic and biodynamic farming practices.

In the cellar, Putnam focuses on small-lot winemaking, doing extended macerations with Cabernet and Merlot to lengthen the wine and flesh out the mid-palate. The results have been phenomenal, with the winery earning two 94 ratings this summer for two of its Cabernets and 90-point ratings for many of its other wines.

For all these reasons, *Wine Enthusiast* selects Raymond Vineyards as our American Winery of the Year. —VIRGINIE BOONE



Jean-Charles Boisset