

Between The Wines

Wine. Food. Travel. More wine

BY RUMA SINGH

THE PASSION OF JEAN-CHARLES BOISSET: 'WINE IS WHO I AM'

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Part 1: "India needs to be known for luxury and style"

Boisset answers questions on his newest, most shiny expensive wine venture with India's Fratelli, with passion and a dash of his inimitable flamboyance and finesse.

Jean-Charles Boisset or JCB to the wine world, is the scion of Burgundy's biggest producer with some of the most out-there early wine innovations (the **French Rabbit** tetrapak, the '**Cooldot**', and aluminium and PET-bottled wines) and a wine empire of 24 wineries that currently sweeps from Burgundy to Canada and Napa Valley, USA. What's particularly riveting about him is his unbounded energy, laser-beam biz focus, and consummate market savviness. It doesn't hurt that he is always dressed to kill à la James Bond, and makes for great copy – a journalist's dream. Not from him will you get the humor or the pedestrian quote. His passion for his world of wine and excitement at playing a starring role in a new wine venture in India are very contagious. I quizzed him on his latest **J'NOON** or 'obsession' (never a more apt name!) with **Fratelli Wines**, one of the top wine brands in India and his role in launching a trio of high-profile, expensive wines in India.

Jean-Charles, it was a pleasure meeting you in Delhi and hearing about your collaboration on the launch of J'NOON. During the Delhi launch, you touched briefly upon the way in which this spontaneous winemaking collaboration with Fratelli happened. Would you explain a little more once again for the readers?

During my first trip to India last year, I toured Fratelli's vineyards, fell in love with them and then all night we blended in the winery, in between eating Indian food... we played, had a lot of fun and fell in love with our creations... We then presented them to a few friends and they loved it and so we said, 'Let's do it!'



Jean-Charles Bolset lounges in the Raymond Red Room. Pic: Moanitoral Jeffrey. Hair pic: Lowell Downey

The J'NOON red has become India's most expensive wine, and the sparkling wine JCB No. 47 and the white aren't far behind. In a nascent wine market like India, is this a particular strategy to go top-end? Would you explain?

We feel it is critical to create an example of a very unique, high-profile, exquisite, high-end wine from India. We feel India needs to be known for luxury and for great style. It is already known for a great flavour profile, but it needs to be known for a great flavour profile for the noblest agricultural product, which is grapes! We feel we were able to make a stunning wine and that the price reflects the quality we were able to put out.

A little bit about the selection of grapes for the wines, please. I'm particularly intrigued by the white blend – Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Why did you pick this blend in Chenin Blanc-driven India? Would you also compare the Chardonnay grapes grown in Akluj with Burgundian Chardonnay or what's grown in Napa?

The two areas I love the most in France for white wine are Burgundy and the Loire Valley, known for Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. I never had the opportunity to blend both, but always enjoyed the two separately. We had (in Akluj) beautiful Chardonnay and gorgeous Sauvignon Blanc with great herbaceousness and elegance and style so we thought about blending the richness and depth of where I come from, which is Chardonnay, with the beautiful herbaceousness, crispness and floral characteristics of Sauvignon Blanc that really cuts beautifully through the spice of Indian food. The two together is a magical blend, and magic for the world because it has never been done much around the world except for now in India! I think it could become a signature blend for India for the future I'm very bullish about it and think the two varieties work beautifully together and are quite magical.

We have an incredible soil profile in Akluj that is limestone and has some calcareous character like in Burgundy. The rootstock and the clones actually come from Burgundy... When you barrel ferment a Chardonnay it becomes magical over there. I was very excited because

all the Indian white wines are Chenin Blanc or Sauvignon Blanc and nobody does Chardonnay. In Akluj it does very well because of the terroir – the climate is very appropriate, the plant is great and the soil is the one we need. From there it is quite easy to vinify it; I'm very bullish about it and feel it could be a point of differentiation.

The best wine in the world for me has always been **Chardonnay** – I'm in love with it, passionate about it, feel it is the king and the queen combined! By using it as the base I feel it is a magnificent and cosmic foundation to the coronation of the crown chakra; I think it is the third eye, the vision of India. It is very aristocratic and extremely status oriented. I'm very glad the foundation is rich, round and powerful and then the notes of the Sauvignon Blanc bring everything we need for magnificent food pairings.

The oak was quite distinct in all three – a very definite style statement. Why did you choose oak rather than the popular fruit-driven style which seems popular currently?

We're trying to make a *vin de garbe*, a wine you want to keep. We're trying to achieve a wine that becomes a statement for the country, a national anthem in your glass, the absolute alchemy of the senses, a statement wine. For that, you need a very powerful tannic structure to last. We believe it is very important that these wines become the identity of what India is about. It is a triptych – the bubbles have biscuit, brioche, and toastiness; the Chardonnay has a foundation that is very rich, intense and very **Côte de Beaune**-like with a fabulous sense of Sauvignon Blanc; then finally the red has a Cabernet Sauvignon base has lovely tannins that are fruit forward now and very prominent, but soon will become deeper, richer and very balanced.

What about the quantities made – 2400 of each, and 7200 in all. Will this be just for starters, or will the number of bottles vary according to vintage, or maybe marketing decisions?

We want more people to be able to enjoy the wines over time, not just a happy few and know we are going to generate a significant interest so want to make sure that people get to try it. So we've planned for growth but want to have a very controlled growth, meticulous growth and want quality and quality proportionate to growth.

Part 2 – ‘We want India as a great wine region, not just as a great food region’

Boisset expounds on his great affinity for all things Indian, how Indian wine can be very good indeed if made with passion and pride, and his future plans for J'NOON.

It is easy to attribute adjectives like audacious, flamboyant and media-astute to Jean-Charles Boisset. He has proved he is all this and more. But underneath those glittering Alexander McQueen and YSL suits beats a heart filled with a singular passion for his all-consuming *raison d'être* – wine. (Don't miss how he personifies himself as a living, breathing vine plant, below).

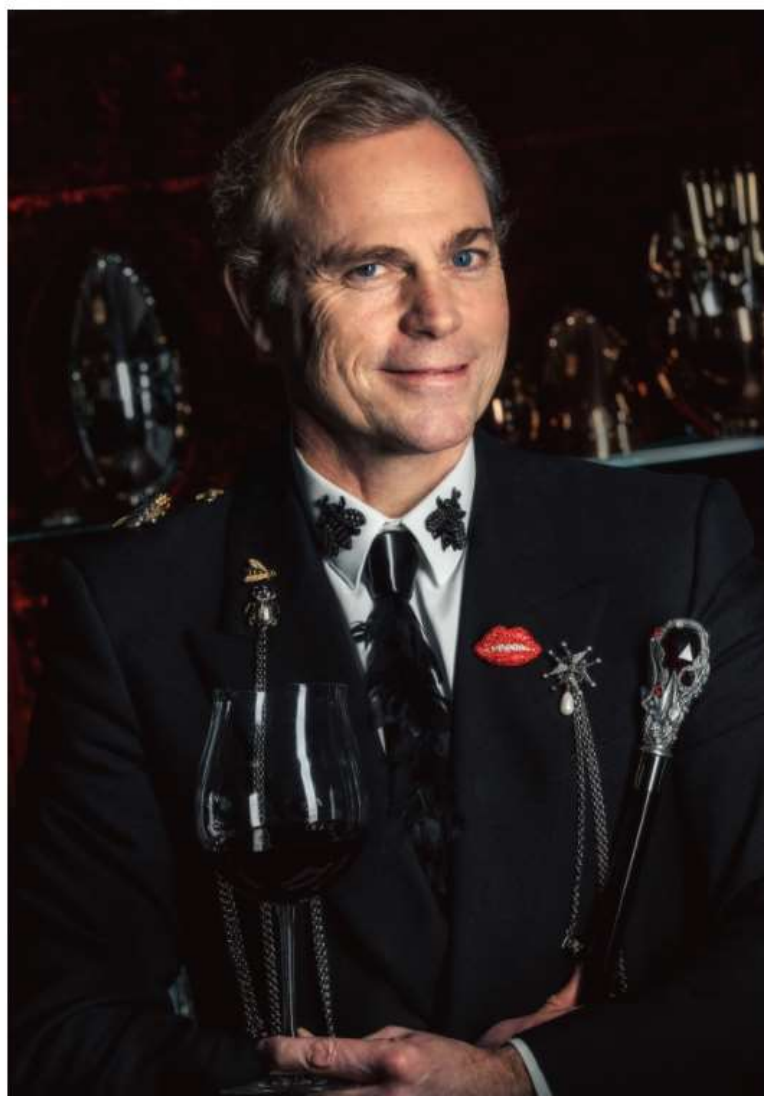
Then, there is his avowed intent to make J'NOON the best wine in India. Yes, we can, he says.

In Part 2 of the interview, he explains how India is ready to take its place among the upcoming wine regions of the world and produce wines of 'insane quality' like J'NOON, to go with the food that India is already famous for.

Whom do you see as the typical consumer of J'NOON?

Someone who is passionate about India, passionate about the expression of India; someone who is proud of India, someone who wants to discover India, someone who is audacious and who wants to feel a different emotion than they have never felt in the traditional world of wine!

You are known as a consummate marketing maven – along with your winemaking skills. How important is it for you for both to co-exist? Also, what are the benefits your Napa/Burgundy crossover background give you, and how it has helped in general?



Prized: Jean-Charles Boisset, photo credit Jeremy Ball. Main photo credit: Alexander Rubin

The essence of a successful, high-quality venture is to be very authentic and to have the will and the resources to make a great wine. Luckily, we have all this as well as a wonderful team who is passionate to execute the long-term success of this incredible expression of India! Therefore, it is important that we maintain insane quality, and that the wonderful spices stay in the wine because we want to create a territory for India. We want to promote India as a great wine region, not just as a great food region. We want to make sure people see it as such – wines with their own identity, own personality, own style and their own world; creating their own circle. This is very exciting because this is the first time it has been done.

I was very fortunate to have been born making wine; wine is who I am. Imagine me as instead of my legs, having roots going down in the soil; imagine me as instead of my blood, having red wine flowing through my veins... We represent the history of wine, the heritage of wine, the finest regions of wine, the development of wine, which is Napa Valley, and then a new way of looking at great wine in a wonderful new country like India. We combine French tradition with the American ideal! We are expressing it in our latest book, *Passion for Wine: The French Ideal and the American Dream*.

India will benefit from our core historical tradition of centuries of winemaking tradition in France, where luxury, fashion, and senses are the utmost expressions, combined with the American way of life and the fascinating new regions of Napa, Sonoma, and California at large. The combination of the two is vibrational and synergistic and contributes to the vision of the new India!

You have visited India several times now, first for your wines from the Boisset Collection, now with J'NOON. Your

observations on the Indian market, any growth you may have observed?

I fell in love with the people, with their genuine interest in food, wine and the local culture. And I fell in love with the genuine, authentic willingness of the people to see India shine around the world. We need to see Indian people becoming very proud of what they do, what they make and what they

create besides the traditional knowledge of what India is all about – engineering and many other great brain exercises. India needs to be 'lifestyle' and has proved it with Bollywood and many other avenues; ventures like hotels and restaurants. India has an incredible history that will take food and wine to the next level. Food has started in a big way, now we need to see wine coming together with food.

Luckily the Indian people are very interested in it, very proud of India and to see India becoming this great new place for food and wine pairing and discovering how to associate wine and spices and becoming a real region for wine. When you look at the territory of India which is a continent on its own, how could we not produce great wine in such a large territory when the wine belt is so close?

What next for JCB and J'NOON+Fratelli? Or is there something new in store from you both?

We need to make sure we are contagious about our passion for wine to everyone... and that our friends in India are genuinely in love with J'NOON and obsessed by the willingness to see wine become a success and are passionate about what we are doing! We feel the 2017 and 2018 vintages will be even better than 2016, even though it is a great start, and want to make sure we continue to transcend what we started. We need to make sure we are disciplined and focused and we get many Indian people becoming ambassadors of the great future of this great country!

It is very important to be audacious, to be pushing new territories and going beyond the limits we know to produce the best wine in India; it is important to break preconceived ideas and be adventurous and be pioneers. We are bringing three cultures together to create something that is greater than the sum of their parts. People need to have trust, confidence and belief in the long-term of what we have started with J'NOON. We need their support, endorsement and passion – and we need their lips to drink this wine, serve this wine and make it discovered. We want everyone to become a great and spontaneous ambassador of our vision!

