

DIRECT MARKETING

Winemaker tries tippable-ware, er, Tupperware approach

‘Ambassadors’ sell bottles at parties, where burping may not be from airtight bowls

Would you go to the wine equivalent of a Tupperware party? This is a serious question. When a major wine producer embraces the Tupperware selling model, an at-home wine-buying party just might be in your future.

“It’s the social marketing way of selling wine, friends to friends,” says Jean-Charles Boisset, proprietor of the Boisset Collection, his family’s group of 20-odd wineries in California and France. He started testing the idea about a year and a half ago with his new venture, Boisset Wine Living. Now, based on its success, he’s aiming to expand.

“Our program is like Tupperware’s, but it’s high end,” Boisset said over lunch in New York.

The company’s “wine ambassadors” set up and pour the wine for the in-home tastings. New Yorker Liz Howng, who works in corporate finance, grabs her Boisset Wine Living kit several evenings a month and heads out to pour and talk about Boisset wines for friends of friends at their apartments.

The kit includes Riedel glasses, wine fact sheets and a corkscrew. Because of byzantine U.S. wine regulations, the host orders the tasting package of five or six wines through an ambassador such as Howng, buying one of the eight offered or a custom mix at a deep discount. Prices range from \$99

to \$389.

After the tasting, guests can order bottles of their favorites and any wines in the Boisset Wine Living catalog — again through her. Howng gets a 25 percent commission on sales, and the wines are shipped directly to customers from California.

“Not everyone can experience our tasting rooms in Napa or Burgundy,” said Boisset, who’s married to winemaker Gina Gallo. “But everyone should have their lips in it.”

Boisset Wine Living draws from wineries owned by the Boisset family, such as DeLoach, Raymond, Buena Vista, Lockwood and JCB. All make solid wines, with a few standouts. The best are the single-vineyard pinots and chardonnays from Sonoma’s DeLoach, Raymond’s expensive cabernet blend Generations (\$165) and the good value JCB cremants.

Many of the wines are exclusives, available only in one of their California tasting rooms or made for the program. Party guests sometimes pay more for wines that are also available in a retail outlet, but they do get to try before they buy.

Boisset’s next project? He points to the gold-plated star burst brooch on his lapel, which he designed. He’ll be launching a line of expensive wines in bottles that double as decanters, each decorated with a copy of one of his 24 brooches, which will also be for sale.

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Jean-Charles Boisset, head of Boisset Family Estates (and Frenchie's owner), sees promise in selling high-end wines at home parties.