



Jean-Charles Boisset Ties Up with Fratelli to Produce Indo-French J'Noon Wines

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The flamboyant French-American wine mogul Jean-Charles Boisset (right) celebrates the launch of J'Noon with his business partner, Fratelli's Kapil Sekhri, at China Kitchen, Hyatt Regency Delhi, where we paired the J'Noon White with dim sum, the J'Noon Red with Peking duck pancakes and the sparkler, JCB No. 47, with Sichuan Prawns and Kung Pao Chicken.

IT'S A TREAT to imbibe **Jean-Charles Boisset's** wine wisdom over a leisurely lunch that touches upon a cornucopia of conversation points, from The Oberoi's new cigar room to Sonam Kalra's haunting Sufi music. Boisset, though, is not some wine greybeard spouting vinobabble – and impressing you with knowledge he knows you don't possess.

If comparisons have to be made, he's the wine world's equivalent of Sir Richard Branson – a showman with a head for business and a passion for wine that he carries in his heart and doesn't wear on his sleeve. With his bright red jacket and heart-shaped gold brooch perched atop its right lapel, tiger skin-print shoes paired with red socks, and his ease with words, slipping between a breezy Californian accent and Gallic tongue rolls, Boisset brings to the wine world a refreshing whiff of drama it sorely lacked – it shows in his choice of a seductive Brigitte Bardot picture to drive home what a "vivacious wine" is all about in his just-published book, *Passion for Wine: The French Ideal and the American Dream*.

As he carries forward his father Jean-Claude's legacy with his sister, Nathalie, Boisset is a member, by birth and by the dint of his independent entrepreneurial drive, of Burgundy's corporate elite because, first, his father, who got into the wine business when he was all of 18 in the 1960s, created a behemoth by targeting the mass audiences that his more established peers chose to ignore.

Jean-Claude Boisset recognised the power of the supermarket and turned it into his cash machine; his son expanded the footprint of the business across the Atlantic to America, a country he fell in love with when he was 11, and Canada, and is now literally wedded to California's wine royalty – his wife Gina Gallo is not only from the family that owns the Fortune 500 **E&J Gallo Winery** and produces every fourth bottle of wine drunk in the United States, but also a winemaker with her own signature line in the 84-year-old company. Together with their twin daughters, they live on the 54-acre property at Yountville, California, the last occupant of which was **Robert Mondavi**, the man who put Napa Valley on the world map. (On a personal note, the first drop of wine I have ever had was from an E&J Gallo bag-in-the-box at a student party at my alma mater, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, in 1988.)

Kapil Sekhri, founder-owner of **Fratelli**, the **Akluj, Maharashtra**, winery that's been making waves with its **Sette, Vitae** and **M/S** labels (my personal favourites being the Sette 2009, a luscious Cabernet Sauvignon-Sangiovese blend, and the 100 per cent barrel-fermented Chardonnay from the Vitae family), is the polar opposite of Jean-Charles. Reserved yet sharp in his observations, conservatively dressed, with inquisitive eyes and a warm, welcoming smile, Sekhri, with considerable help from Fratelli's winemaker **Piero Masi** and the international wine impresario **Steven Spurrier**, as well as his more visible Italian business partner **Alessio Seci**, has been slowly but surely turning the brand into a power to reckon with. And if the old truism of opposites attracting each other holds good, then Sekhri and Boisset, better known by his initials JCB, seem to have been paired in heaven for the onerous task of changing forever how the world perceives Indian wines.

They have teamed up – Fratelli, incidentally, also imports Jean-Charles's international portfolio – to roll out the **J'Noon** duo of white and red wines, and the sparkler, a 100 per cent Chardonnay (*blanc de blancs*) with playful bubbles and a pronounced fruitiness named **JCB No. 47** in honour of our independence year. Boisset says the message that these wines send out to the world is that "India can produce very high-profile, powerful, sensual and seductive wines."

Sekhri, whose company was the first to put Sangiovese on India's wine map, calls them "the best expressions of French grapes and Indian terroir". To be priced – expensively for Indian wines – at Rs 2,500 (J'noon White), Rs 3,500 (JCB No. 47, the sparkler) and Rs 4,000 (J'Noon Red), just 2,400 bottles of each wine will be produced in a year. The idea is to make them what Indian wines have for long aspired to be – aspirational.

Both Boisset and Sekhri have a big laugh when I point out that the J'Noon Red contained 4 per cent **Sangiovese** – it must be the first time that a famous Italian wine grape finds itself in a polygamous marriage with three French varieties (**Cabernet Sauvignon**, 57.5 per cent; **Marselan**, a cross between Cab Sauvignon and Grenache, and **Petit Verdot**, which you find in most Bordeaux-style blends, at 38.5 per cent each). The J'Noon White is a blend of **Chardonnay** (60 per cent) and **Sauvignon Blanc** (40 per cent), where, in the words of Boisset, "the depth and opulence of Chardonnay has been balanced with the acidity of Sauvignon Blanc" – and then he adds naughtily: "it makes the tongue roll as it would in a French kiss."

Producing the wine, though, wasn't anything but a French kiss. It took Sekhri a year to zero in on the clone and the plot where the grapes for the J'Noon wines would be grown, and with the average annual rainfall in the five monsoons preceding 2017 hovering precariously at 40mm, and with no water till 1,400 feet

below the ground, he had to lay a 4km pipeline to the nearest irrigation source. Getting the blends right, and making sure the taste profile was international, also required two nights of non-stop work in a row, which is why both Boisset and Sekhri emphasize the 0.5s in the J'Noon Red bouquet of grapes.

J'Noon, despite its French sound, has its root in the Arabic-Urdu word *junoon*, which is used to describe the state of obsessive passion for God realisation that a good Sufi finds himself in the course of his mystical practices. It brought back memories of Shyam Benegal's 1978 film *Junoon*, starring Shashi Kapoor, Jennifer Kendall and Nafisa Ali, based on Ruskin Bond's novella *A Flight of Pigeons* set in the backdrop of the Great Rebellion of 1857. It is one of my all-time favourite films. And I can already say that the J'Noon White is my new favourite.