

Boisset talks about the future of the Oakville Grocery: A different kind of love story



One of the first things Jean-Charles Boisset did when he purchased the Oakville Grocery was to move the brick oven in the patio between the shop and the adjacent Victorian residence so that visitors can sit at tables and take in the view.

“Look at it,” he said. “There, to the north is Mount St. Helena. Across the road is To Kalon, the most famous vineyard in Napa Valley. There are the Mayacamas Mountains, and beyond them, the Pacific Ocean. This is not a million-dollar view; it’s a billion-dollar view.”

Boisset is devoted to the pleasures of wine and food and other elements of the good life in which his native France excels, but this has never prevented him being an ardent admirer of California, its products, its lifestyle, and its history. He has purchased properties in Northern California, among them Vista, DeLoach and Raymond wineries. But his newest acquisition may prove to be his most significant tribute to his adopted state.

At a meeting in the 1881 Victorian house, Boisset outlined his plans for this historic building and the grocery store, the purchase for which closed on Jan. 3.

“We’re just camping,” he said cheerfully to the group sitting in armchairs that had been pushed to one corner of the ground floor of the residence where changes are underway. It was a comfortable form of camping: Boisset was pouring glasses of Raymond Vineyard’s 2012 Generations, a label he created after he bought Raymond in 2009. It is his tribute to the Raymond family’s five generations of making wine in Napa Valley since 1876. This wine was an excellent choice, not just because it’s a beautiful wine, but because as we drank it, Boisset was enthusiastically describing what he is planning for the house: The 1881 Napa Valley Museum of Wine.

What Boisset envisions opening in the space this spring is a museum that will tell the story of the Napa Valley, its history, geology, and how it came to be the renowned wine region it is today. “We are so proud of the heritage, proud of what California has to offer,” he said. “Let us study where we come from to know who we are.”

You might almost call it an unlikely love story.

Boisset's fascination with California history began as a boy when he visited the state with his grandparents. "My grandparents were all school teachers," he said. "We came to California to visit the missions."

The last one they visited was the Sonoma Mission where they also discovered the Buena Vista Winery, California's first premium winery, built in 1857 by a flamboyant adventurer, Agoston Harazthy, an immigrant from Hungary who was later reportedly eaten by a crocodile in Nicaragua.

The Boisset family, based in Burgundy, owns extensive wine properties in France, and when Boisset returned to the U.S. as an adult to explore wine-making possibilities here, he remembered Buena Vista. "It took me three tries," he said, but he was finally able to purchase and restore the winery that today shares with visitors the history and story of the place as well as the wines.

When the Oakville Grocery came on the market, Boisset said, it was a much faster deal. "I had 24 hours to make a decision." The lure of the history of the place proved irresistible.

The past

The Oakville Grocery, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, has served as a commercial and community center for nearly 130 years, says Napa historian Rebecca Yerger.

Yerger was hired as a historic preservation consultant when a Caltrans project to widen Highway 29 threatened the Oakville Grocery with demolition. Her job was to research, document and nominate the Oakville Grocery to the National Register of Historic Places. The project succeeded and the building was listed on the National Register as of July 22, 1993.

In 1881, James and Jennie McQuaid bought a prime Oakville parcel from J.J. McIntyre on Napa County's main county road, Highway 29, across that road from the train station in what was then the "bustling little community" of Oakville, Yerger wrote in a article in the Napa Valley Register. Oakville then comprised a blacksmith shop, barber shop, saloon and two vineyards, H.W. Crabb, eventually renamed To Kalon and Brun and Chaix.

The McQuaid's built "the Oakville Mercantile" and the two-story, Italianate-style home for them and their three daughters.

"The McQuaids offered numerous services and supplies at their Oakville Mercantile," Yerger wrote. "A June 10, 1881 Napa County Reporter newspaper advertisement detailed these services and more: "Oakville Station—Where James McQuaid officiates as Railroad Agent, Postmaster and Wells, Fargo and Company's agent, also dispensing at a reasonable figure, all kinds of general merchandise to people of the vicinity, from a calico dress to a keg of tenpenny nails."

After James McQuaid died in 1889, Jennie took over running the Mercantile. "On July 4, 1893, a fire ravaged Oakville's commercial district," Yerger said. "The fire began at the back of another mercantile owned by Melchior Kemper. His store and some of his neighbors' businesses were burned to the ground. The McQuaids' home and Oakville Mercantile sustained only minor damage."

Jennie McQuaid went on to marry her one-time business competitor, Kemper. She eventually sold the Oakville Mercantile to Frederick Durant, who modernized the shop and served as “sole provider of essential daily living items as well as a lifeline to the outside world. In addition to supplies for house and farm, the Mercantile provided the important services of telegraph, telephone and mail,” said Yerger. “Durant also acted as the middle-man for many Oakville farmers by purchasing their surplus eggs, produce and goods. He would then sell these commodities to Bay Area markets.” The Oakville Mercantile became the community center for the Oakville vicinity where residents socialized and caught up on the latest news.

After Durant’s death in 1943, Everett A. Guigni purchased the building, and the family continued the mercantile tradition for nearly 30 years. In the early 1970s, they sold the San Francisco Bay Area-based partnership eventually known as the Oakville Grocery Company, which, in turn, sold it to the late Leslie Rudd whose company operated it until the sale to Boisset.

The future

Boisset plans to continue the mercantile tradition. Unlike his other establishments, which show a certain sophisticated, if not continental, flair, he is not planning any red velvet couches, tiger skin rugs or Baccarat crystal chandeliers for the homey old shop. “And I have promised that the Coca-Cola sign (on the building’s exterior) will remain.”

And although his first food venture in the valley, Atelier Fine Foods in Yountville, sells a dazzling array of international gourmet products — “the best of the best” condiments, chocolates and cheeses — the Oakville Grocery will be, first and foremost, a purveyor of local goods. “First from Napa County, then from the rest of California, the U.S. and maybe 10 percent international,” Boisset said.

“We are inviting people to present your products,” he said. Barry Dinsmore, the general manager of the Oakville Grocery is now meeting regularly with local purveyors to see if their products have a place on the grocery store shelves.

Boisset said he also intends to expand the wine offerings in the Oakville Grocery. “We want to build it back as a wine store and be highly inclusive of all Napa wineries.”

Likewise, the companion Oakville Grocery in Healdsburg, which he also purchased, will serve as a showcase for Sonoma products.

Eventually, Boisset envisions exporting an 1881 line of California goods to Europe and beyond. Beyond McDonald’s and KFC, California has a certain mystique, he said. “We think America has everything — the top of the top.”

The 1881 Museum

By April, he hopes to open the museum in the former residence. It will include displays for all of the Napa Valley wine appellations and opportunities to taste the wines and learn about the differences in the soils and wine-making techniques, as well as the stories of the people who first lived in the valley.

“It is one thing to say ‘We love Napa,’ but why?” Boisset said.

If you find a wine you love, you should be able to buy and even enjoy it in the patio space between the Grocery and the residence, where he’ll be installing new tables so that visitors can have pizza or burgers. “I have always thought that wine is meant for food,” he said. “And here you can sit outside here; let’s enjoy this.”

In the museum, “we will put history up front,” he said. “I have always thought as well it is important to educate. This will be for all of the wineries, to tell the story of the Napa Valley for those who live here, for those who visit. We think it is important to have a great time, but also to have the basis of what Napa is about.”

“None of us own a place like this,” he said. “It will be here after we are all gone. We need a *raison d’être*, the reason why we are here and what it makes sense to believe. We need an enclave to dream, to escape, and enter the neutrality of history. We all want to learn where we’ve come from — and to look at the view.”