



Burgundy Legend's Indian Adventure



© JCB | Jean-Charles Boisset (R) celebrates the launch of the J'Noon range with Fratelli's Kapil Sekhri.

Jean-Charles Boisset's adventurous spirit took him from Burgundy to Napa – now he has a new challenge.

By W. Blake Gray | Posted Thursday, 28-Jun-2018

India is a black hole for wine. The ebullient Jean-Charles Boisset, a native Burgundian who has also conquered California, has launched himself into that void.

Boisset is making three wines in [India](#) in collaboration with [Fratelli Wines](#), which is itself a collaboration between three men from Tuscany and four local partners. Fratelli has a 240-acre estate vineyard in central India.

"I discovered wine there thanks to our importers," Boisset told Wine-Searcher. "It started with them importing our French and [California](#) wines. I was there two-and-a-half years ago introducing [DeLoach](#) and Burgundy wines and the JCB, the bubbles. I fell in love with the country. I love their approach to life and their meaning of life. "

The immense potential for an Indian wine market is still theoretical. India is the second most-populous country in the world, after China. India has more people than the US, Japan, Mexico, Germany, France, Italy, the UK and Brazil combined.

However, India as a whole drinks less wine than Cuba, Cyprus or Poland, according to the Wine Institute. China, with only a slightly larger population, drinks 100 times as much wine, which is why you often read wine stories about China but not about India.

But India has a lot of wealth and a growing middle class, and who knows when wine might have its cultural moment. Locally produced wines can only help.

Boisset said he became interested in making wine after tasting what Fratelli was already producing. The vineyards are planted with 12 different grape varieties overseen by a consulting winemaker, Piero Masi, who was the viticulturist at Isole e Olena in Tuscany.

"After I tasted the wines, I took them back to Mumbai and tasted with the president of the Taj Hotel over dinner," Boisset said. "And he said: 'This is a major statement for India.' I agreed. He said: 'Would you consider making wine here?' I said, 'Why not?' "

Boisset, who owns wineries in [Napa](#) and [Sonoma](#) Counties, is not a man of small goals.

"The goal was to create the best wine ever made in India," he said.

However, making wine in India is a challenge. China grows most of its vines in northern regions that are so cold in winter that they must be buried to protect them from frost. India has cool places too. For example, Darjeeling, famous for its tea, is similar in climate to Auckland, New Zealand. But unfortunately Darjeeling is not where Fratelli's estate vineyard is.

Their vineyards are in Akluj, a former cotton-farming town in the center of [Maharashtra](#) state. Is it hot? Uh, yeah.

Akluj is at the same level above the equator as the southern part of Saudi Arabia. Its mean annual temperature is 26.3° C (79° F). The mean annual temperature in Calistoga in the hottest part of Napa Valley is 15.3° C; in Fresno in California's hot central valley, it's 17.8° C.

Akluj doesn't have a cool winter and the temperature doesn't drop much at night. The hottest month is May, which might be good to help kick-start the grapes to mature before the monsoon rains hit in September.

Growing plants is not a challenge: growing world-class wine grapes is.

"We have a very interesting temperature scale," Boisset said. "It's a beautiful place, a place where you would love to live. There's some calcareous limestone soil. There's a little bit of granite. That's what makes it so exciting. You have a beautiful root system going far down in the soil. There's gorgeous wood, so if you trellis it correctly and low to the ground, you can get great results. It's a little like the northern Rhône, southern Burgundy style. We're not irrigating. We use only Burgundy techniques and Bordeaux techniques to make wine. You're going to find the real India character in it."

And what is that, exactly? To my taste buds, it's California [Chardonnay](#) circa 2003. This might not be a bad idea. Here's why, and it's counterintuitive, but trust me on this.

When I first started writing about wine, I got a lot of buttery Chardonnays as samples and didn't know what to do with them, since buttery Chard is not my jam. They're good with popcorn, which makes sense. I also discovered they're pretty good with spicy Indian food. The creamy texture ameliorates the burn, and the spicy food accentuates the fruit in the wine. It's an odd wine pairing that I never wrote about until now because I never had reason to extol buttery Chardonnays. Until now.

The bubbly, JCB No. 476 Akluj, India Brut NV, smells and tastes like sparkling California Chardonnay, the old style toasty buttery stuff. This is not an accident. Most Indian sparkling wine is made from [Chenin Blanc](#), thought to be more heat-resistant, but this is from 100 percent Chardonnay.

"We oak-aged the sparkling specifically," Boisset said. "With great depth and exoticism, which is coming not from fruit but from flower. We want to make wine that's not the same from around the world. If it's the same, then what's the point?"

2016 [J'Noon India White Wine](#) (13.5 percent alcohol) is toasty and slightly buttery but has the acidity to carry it; it's medium-bodied but not overly fat. It has some golden apple, but is not fruit-driven. It's made from a blend of 60 percent Chardonnay and 40 percent Sauvignon Blanc. From my experience with spicy Indian food, this might work.

2016 [J'Noon India Red Wine](#) (13.5 percent alcohol) is a blend of 57.5 percent Cabernet Sauvignon with Petit Verdot, [Marselan](#) and Sangiovese. It has some fresh herb in the aroma, a light-bodied blackcurrant flavor, and would hold its own in a matchup with similar kitchen-sink red blends from California. If you count the degree of difficulty it's an achievement.

In the first vintage Boisset made only 200 cases of each wine, most of which he expects will sell in India. However, future plans are to export the wines to England and the US.

"India is big in England," Boisset said. "We've had a lot of calls. People say: 'I have an Indian restaurant, I would like to try these wines.'"

Boisset says he hopes to double the production next year.

"We're high-priced, we're super-premium, and we want to remain there," he says. "We want to grow slowly and organically. In India, I could feel that I had a calling."