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The king of flashy Napa wineries just acquired a new tasting room in a prime Rutherford location

Jean-Charles Boisset will be taking over Elizabeth Spencer Winery, a small brand at Highway 29 and Rutherford Rd



Esther Mobley

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One of Wine Country’s most prolific investors — and biggest personalities known for flair like bottles studded with Swarovski crystals — has just added another historic winery to his extensive holdings.

Jean-Charles Boisset, the France-born vintner who owns Raymond, Buena Vista and DeLoach wineries and the Oakville Grocery, has purchased Elizabeth Spencer Winery, a small brand known primarily for its popular tasting room in Rutherford. The scion of an established wine-industry family in France’s Burgundy region, the Boisset Collection also owns reputable wineries in France such as Bouchard and J. Moreau. A purchase price was not disclosed.

Elizabeth Pressler, who co-owned the winery with her husband Spencer Graham, said that she hoped Boisset would build the tasting room into an even greater destination. “Spencer and I didn’t have partners, and we had very ambitious plans to develop the property, and we didn’t have the resources to do that on our own,” she said. “Jean-Charles has the vision, the resources and a very professional company.”

Unlike some of Boisset’s other acquisitions, Elizabeth Spencer does not come with any land; the winery has always purchased grapes from vineyards owned by other people and made its wine in shared facilities.



Elizabeth Spencer Wines has a petite tasting room with an adjacent, outdoor garden with white roses.
 Stephanie Wright Hession/Special to The Chronicle 2013

But its tasting room, though small, represents a major asset. Partially located inside an 1872 post office, the tasting room sits at one of the most visible spots along Napa Valley’s busiest tourist artery: the intersection of Highway 29 and Rutherford Rd.

For a vintner like Boisset, who has invested a considerable amount of effort into elaborate experiences like a blend-your-own wine lab, a location like that counts for a lot. What’s more, the property he’s purchasing also includes a warehouse, which Boisset plans to transform into more space for visitors, said Patrick Egan, vice president of marketing and communications for the Boisset Collection. That new space will likely be dedicated partly to Elizabeth Spencer and partly to “a new concept,” Egan said.

“My goal was to have not just a winery in Rutherford but a place that could be visited,” said Boisset.

Boisset, who is married to the powerful vintner Gina Gallo, is known to love ambitious concepts. His wineries are known for having secret hideaways (like the “speakeasy” at Raymond), loudly dressed mannequins posed above wine vats, flashily decorated lounges (like the “bubble room” at Buena Vista, a shrine to sparkling wine). He’s released wine bottles encased in velvet labels, and his wineries offer highly involved experiences, like an outdoor tasting room for dogs.

It has always been a goal of Boisset’s to buy property in downtown Rutherford. Located in the middle of Napa Valley, the town is known for producing wines with distinctive flavors due to its soils, climate and topography — so distinctive that wine-industry insiders refer to the taste as “Rutherford dust,” reminiscent of cocoa powder and sarsaparilla.

“To me, Rutherford is *the* place,” Boisset said. “As much as we love Oakville and St. Helena, I think the characteristics of the wines in Rutherford are phenomenal. For Cabernet I think it’s a dream.”



Vintner and entrepreneur Jean-Charles Boisset shows a wine cellar at historic Napa Valley landmark Oakville Grocery, which he purchased in 2019.

Liz Hafalia/The Chronicle 2019

Now that he has an anchor in Rutherford, Boisset owns commercial property in all of the major towns in Napa Valley: Napa, Yountville, Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena and Calistoga. He joked that Highway 29, which runs through all of them, is now “the Boisset highway.”

Elizabeth Spencer Winery was established in 1998, a portmanteau of its two owners’ names. Pressler had worked in Napa’s wine industry since 1978, in marketing roles at Joseph Phelps, Hess Collection and other wineries; Graham had run a boutique wine wholesale company in Virginia. The brand produces about 15,000 cases of wine annually, according to Egan, using grapes not only from Napa but also Sonoma and Mendocino counties. Although the bulk of its wine sales take place in the tasting room, Egan said, their Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon wines are also distributed nationally.

The historic nature of the tasting room, located in the former post office, tracks with Boisset’s interest in purchasing landmarks. Buena Vista Winery dates to 1857, for example, and Oakville Grocery to 1881. In October, he purchased the Calistoga Depot, an old train station once used to transport people to the town’s Indian Springs Resort. In September, he and Gallo, senior director of winemaking for E. J. Gallo, the country’s largest wine company, purchased the Ink House, an 1878 home that had been converted into an upscale bed-and-breakfast.

Asked whether more acquisitions are in the pipeline, Boisset hinted that the answer is yes. “Jean-Charles is always looking,” Egan said.

Esther Mobley is The San Francisco Chronicle’s senior wine critic. Email: emobley@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@Esther_mobley](https://twitter.com/Esther_mobley)