

Jean-Charles Boisset: Vintner for the Ages

Napa and Sonoma's Most Charismatic Winemaker

By Fred Bollaci, Photos Courtesy of Boisset Collection



Jean-Charles Boisset's life story is a testament to his deep connection to wine, his appreciation of history, and his boundless *joie de vivre*. Born and raised in Vougeot, Burgundy, France in 1969, Jean-Charles Boisset was destined to be a vintner. Jean-Charles' parents, Jean-Claude and Claudine Boisset, established a winery in 1961, and three years later, acquired their first vineyard, Les Evocelles in Gevrey-Chambertin. His parents groomed and trained their son for the wine business, instilling the values of hard work and hands-on dedication. At age seven, he was given his first tastes of wine—two wines from Burgundy, a 1969 Clos de Vougeot and a 1964 Bonnes Mares. It was a transformative moment for the young Jean-Charles he would never forget. Today, Jean-Charles Boisset owns and operates 28 wineries in Napa, Sonoma, and Monterey in California, France (Burgundy, Beaujolais, Rhône Valley, and South of France), England, and India under the Boisset Collection label. All the collection's wines are certified biodynamic or organic.

Jean-Charles' love for the United States dates back to the gratitude his family had for the Americans who fought in World War II to defend France. His grandparents often told stories of the American soldiers who liberated France, and planted the seed that he should dream to one day live in America. "America and Americans will always have a special place in our hearts," Boisset said. What Jean-Charles most loves about America are its people, "the American spirit excites!" Young Jean-Charles first visited the U.S. when he was eleven with his sister Nathalie and their grandparents to see the missions of California—Monterey, Carmel, San Francisco, and Sonoma. One stop on his journey stood out—Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma, dating back to 1857, the very first winery in California!



Buena Vista Winery

The beauty and history of this place spoke to him. The young boy prophetically declared he would live in the U.S. and own a winery here one day.

Growing up with his bedroom directly above the family winery and learning the art of winemaking—from the vine, to the barrel, to the bottle, and ultimately the table, where he was taught to appreciate wine as an integral part of a meal and a celebration of life and nature's bounty just went with the *terroir*. For Boisset, "Wine is a gift of God," a nod to his deep faith. In a deeply divided world, wine is something that unites people. "Oceans may separate us but wine brings us together."

Jean-Charles attended high school in the U.S., college in the U.K, and graduate studies at UCLA. He enjoyed sports (soccer,



Raymond Vineyards Red Room

kickboxing, tennis—anything outdoors) and finance, having studied business and finance in London, earning an MBA at the University of San Francisco, and passing the Series 7 stockbroker's exam. He realized he did not enjoy math, calling himself more intuitive than logical. Being naturally curious, Boisset wanted to explore other pursuits before

returning to his roots. "Wine was in my blood, my DNA," Boisset said. He expanded the family wine business, first co-founding Domaine de la Vougeraie with his sister, and then set his sights on America. "I love the USA more than any other place on this planet," Boisset said wistfully.

Living in California, he was able to explore the best winemaking regions, and he felt most at home in Napa and Sonoma. Boisset purchased his first California winery, Lyeth Estates, followed by DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma's Russian River Valley, followed by Raymond Vineyards in Napa. Boisset proclaimed the Russian River AVA to be "America's Burgundy, the next Côte d'Or," known for its excellent Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Jean-Charles introduced biodynamic farming practices to Raymond and today the winery is home to the largest exhibition about biodynamic farming in the region, "The Theater of Nature." Boisset added elements of his own luxurious style to Raymond, creating several tasting areas for guests, including the Crystal Cellar with mannequins suspended from the ceiling, Baccarat crystal, and Christofle silver. The famed "Red Room" features a burlesque-style décor with red velvet. The French are very devoted to their dogs, whom frequently dine at the table in



JCB Yountville Members Lounge



JCB San Francisco

Boisset's mission is clear: "A sense of excellence—delivering the best quality possible for wines and spirits at each price point."

looks for the beauty in this world, a keen, colorful sense of style is as integral to a well-dressed, well-rounded man as is crafting a beautiful, well-balanced wine, and pairing it with the right foods and occasion. "Wine is the ultimate luxury and sense of style," Boisset said. "Enjoying wine is like appreciating art, culture, history, travel, and fashion. My goal is to give people much more than the 14.5% alcohol in their bottle. It is a sense of allure, style." Visiting his tasting rooms, it is evident that Jean-Charles Boisset has created a feast for the senses. "I wanted to create a great environment for people—for people to enjoy," Boisset said. From the architecture, to the design, to the taste and smell—"I can't sing or play a musical instrument, but I read and study art, architecture, and design, and look to create spaces that are a sensory experience." From the deep velvet tones, Baccarat chandeliers, and cool

restaurants—Boisset dedicated a dog-friendly area at Raymond, named after their own dog, Frenchie. Today, his gorgeous JCB Tasting Salon and Atelier in Yountville features sexy leopard print sofas and cheetah print stools, a digital wine ordering system in which guests can build a profile based on their preferences and wines they've tried. The Atelier sells gourmet food, including cheeses, meats, foie gras, smoked salmon, and caviar, along with luxury goods including Baccarat stemware and Bernardaud porcelain. I especially enjoyed visiting The JCB Yountville Members Lounge. This over-the-top space is complete with dramatic furnishings, unique artifacts (including a meteorite collection) and stunning décor, John Legend's famed red piano, and a unique collection of art, a feast for the senses! The famed "Last Supper Room" includes a sumptuous table surrounded by clear resin chairs with the images of those living and deceased whom Jean-Charles would invite to his last meal on earth. Among the guests of honor would be of course his wife, Mother Teresa, Walt Disney, Salvador Dali, and his Frenchie.

In 2006, Boisset met Gina Gallo, winemaker at Gallo Family Vineyards of the famed California winemaking family, in a tasting room in Bordeaux. The two were married in 2009 at the Fairmont San Francisco, and now split their time between Napa Valley and Burgundy with their twin daughters. Today,

Boisset considers himself Franco-American. In 2011, the opportunity arose to purchase Buena Vista Winery. Upon purchasing the historic property, Boisset began a comprehensive restoration of the property. The same year, the Boissets purchased the former home of Robert Mondavi in Napa. In 2015, Buena Vista was again producing wine in the original cellars, and Boisset opened a "Bubble Lounge" where guests can enjoy his JCB sparkling wine.

For Jean-Charles, who appreciates and



The Ink House

leopard prints of the furniture, there is something seductive about the Boisset experience. An experience at Boisset's tasting room is the wine tasting equivalent to a luxury spa day. You leave feeling refreshed, renewed, revitalized, invigorated, inspired. In his vast portfolio of wines, Boisset's mission is clear: "A sense of excellence—delivering the best quality possible for wines and spirits at each price point."

I had to ask about Boisset's trademark red socks he is frequently photographed wearing. "Fire is red—as in the fire in the center of the earth. The land. The terroir. Where the grapes grow. I wear the red socks on my feet to show my respect for and connection to the earth." To Boisset, the socks compliment his bright blue eyes and tell a special story of homage to both the earth below his feet and to the sky and heavens above, represented by the blue eyes, connecting the two worlds, the physical and the spiritual, the human and the divine, the temporary to the eternal. "As above, so below," says Boisset. Everything is about energy, balance, and connectedness—as human beings and as souls who are stewards of this planet.

Talking with Jean-Charles, I quickly got the sense that he is an old soul with deep respect for traditions, and the greater good of humanity. When asked about when and where in history he could live if he got to choose, Boisset said, without hesitation; "Renaissance Italy—the 15th century. Florence, Rome—being amongst Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and the Medicis." A time of transformation. A time of awakening—as evidenced by the colorful religious paintings and the revival of classical elements of Greek and Roman architecture, and the resulting sense of harmony. People went beyond surviving the "Dark Ages" to thriving, learning, expressing, exploring, creating, and growing. The Renaissance spirit is clear in what Jean-Charles is doing and how he approaches life. "We all have the power to change the world. It's about being grateful to be alive, to make a difference in this tense, intense world. We are not here to be vanilla!" Listening to Jean-Charles speak is inspiring—he could easily teach a course or be a motivational speaker. Our world needs more positive, upbeat, passionate people like him. His message is truly inspiring, timeless, and much-needed in our world. It's about being grateful for whom we are and the

unique set of talents and skills we are given, and to share our unique vision, underscored with kindness and generosity of spirit with the world. Wine for Jean-Charles tells a message of love and unity, both at the table, and with the positive contributions his brand makes to various charitable organizations, including the Association of African-American Vintners.

Jean-Charles has his own label, JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset—each bottling with a specific number, in the style of Chanel. His favorite bottling is "JCB No. 3," a Russian River Pinot Noir that combines Burgundian techniques and Sonoma fruit—"Nuits St. Georges meets Russian River," uniting his two favorite places, France and California. The Boisset Collection today has some 1,500 employees, a large family, all of whom were invited to Burgundy—the ultimate corporate retreat! Boisset also named a wine "JCB No. 7," a tribute to the first time he ever tasted wine, "JCB No. 81" references the year he first visited California as a child, and "JCB No.39"

to commemorate the year his grandparents married. I had to ask, "What's your favorite wine and food pairing?" "Champagne and caviar is orgasmic," Jean-Charles said with a smile, and naturally, Boisset has his own exclusive line of six caviars he developed with Michelin-Star Chef Thomas Keller available for purchase.

So what's next for this Renaissance man? "There is a lot in the pipeline," Boisset teased. Jean-Charles recently purchased a triptych of Victorian homes in Napa Valley, dating back to the late 19th century, one each in Oakville, Rutherford, and St. Helena—and has worked to restore them, adding luxurious modern amenities to offer to overnight guests. Boisset is also developing a line of distilled spirits. We raise a glass to this iconic tastemaker and look forward to what's next. *A votre santé!* □

For more information about Jean-Charles Boisset and The Boisset Collection of wines, please visit: www.boissetcollection.com



Buena Vista Winery
Photo by Alexander Rubin

Boisset Collection Wines to Enjoy

Buena Vista Winery, 2021 Pinot Gris, Sonoma County \$30

De Loach Vineyards, 2022 Trilogy White Blend, Sonoma County \$38

JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset, 2019 No. 81 Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast \$65

JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset, NV "French Kiss" Sparkling Gamay, Beaujolais, France \$29

JCB by Jean-Charles Boisset, 2021, White Bordeaux Blend (Sauvignon Blanc), Napa \$68

Raymond Vineyards, 2020 "Generations" Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa \$195