

## Meet the curious, audacious Jean-Charles Boisset, CEO of Napa Valley luxury wine and spirits group



KATHRYN REED

FOR THE NORTH BAY BUSINESS JOURNAL

November 25, 2021, 8:00AM



[Order Article Reprint](#)

Jean-Charles Boisset believes taking risks contributes to his success in the wine industry as well as in other sectors of the hospitality industry. Taking risks, he says, is part of his DNA and he wants it to be part of his legacy.

Risk comes with creating a diverse portfolio of luxurious brands that includes jewelry on wine bottles, opulent chandeliers in tasting rooms, and a boutique hotel where room nights start at \$850.

The 48-year-old French native has created a multi-million-dollar company — he declined to disclose the exact value of his holdings — in a manner that will continue long after he is gone.

While Boisset is the CEO of the family-owned Boisset Collection that is headquartered in St. Helena in the Napa Valley, it is a title he eschews. His approach is to give his more than 1,500 employees the tools to do their jobs without a heavy hand from him.

Yes, he has a vision he wants them to buy into, but he calls his management style collaborative, inspiring, energetic and passionate.

Below Boisset delves further into his world in a conversation with the North Bay Business Journal that has been edited for space and clarity.

## What is your approach to making business decisions?

Intuition, collaborative work, input from others. And loving a sense of risk. Any decisions— easy or difficult — are easy as long as you're willing to take risk.

## What keeps you up at night?

What keeps me up at night is the fact that we all need as farmers, as viticulturists, as growers is to be real stewards of the land and being the extension of Mother Nature rather than working against her. That's really my No. 1 worry.

## What qualities do you admire in other executives?

I don't believe you lead from a tower, but by literally being in the trenches. (If) I would be a general, I would be the first on the battlefield. And being extremely present in every facet of what I do. What I love in leadership is people who think they act big and take risks and allow themselves to really live on the tangent of the circle as I was saying earlier and to allow risk to bring greatness.

## What risks have you taken?

It's not easy to create luxury. And at every step, you take risks because you deal with very expensive raw materials or products, and you really push it.

We've been an extreme innovator in the wine world from packaging. You know, having jewelry on wine bottles, using clear glass for the most expensive wine ... to using open top with fermenters, all techniques from the 16th century, using natural fermentation. We take risk and innovation in packaging ... screw caps for very expensive wines to glass closures are very expensive.

We are creating a very unique destination in our wineries with experiences that are second to none, but very different than others. And for us to digress into jewelry making and fragrance. And during fragrance tastings in our wineries as well as candles could be a risk to the flavors of the wine.

We just bought the depot in Calistoga, and are taking huge risks where we are re-establishing the distillery and the work of Sam Brannan from 1868.

The last one is for a European coming to the United States, and doing business here is extremely risky because it's a big platform. America is the big table.

## What was the hardest lesson you learned early in your career?

I made one decision one time when I was younger to not do what I was meant to do, and I will regret it forever. So, if I say to someone, you have a talent for something, go for it. Take the risk, you can always do something else which is more traditional.

## Share with us what that one thing was that you didn't do.

I could have gone much further in sports and I chose the voice of reason and education rather than following my intuition. I was conditioned by my environment to go the safe road, which I did, and I believe it was a major mistake.

I had dreams of playing professional soccer, a story I allude to on my JCB No. 11, which was my jersey number.

## Would you trade what you have today to be a professional soccer player?

If I were going back, I would have made a different decision. Yes.

### WINE INDUSTRY REPORT MONTHLY

Subscribe to the Business Journal's monthly Wine Industry Report newsletter.

Subscribe Now

Read our [Privacy Policy](#)



## Where will your business be in the next five years?

I think we will be greater, more passionate, even more complete. Even more thorough in adding phenomenal places to our portfolio and collection of wineries will tell even a greater story tomorrow than today.

Our vortex of energy keeps getting greater and greater and accelerating. It's not that we aren't great today, but we keep inviting greatness into our circle, and our circle keeps getting better.

## What concerns do you have for the business?

I have zero concerns. I'm 100% optimistic.

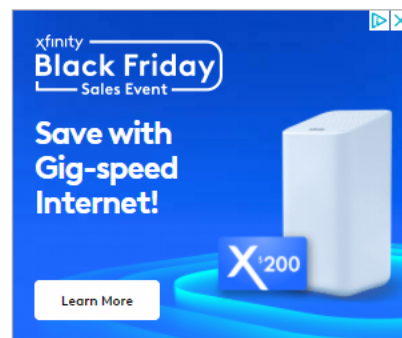
## You said earlier you believe the company might be better without you. Why?

Well, because we constantly are composed with greater people, and because I will become maybe, you know, probably passé. I will become obsolete, I will become not as trendy as we are today. I will not keep up with the evolution of time.

We have an amazing team that will and is ready to take it to the next level whether I'm around or not. Many things that are happening today are happening without me being involved in every minor detail. I structure it as such. I'm excited when I see people shining without me being involved in every step, when they take calculated, but inspirational risks themselves and they go for it.

I believe we need to stop having the ego as large as the world to say it's going to collapse without me. We are a collection of amazing wineries, amazing brands that are far beyond my time. Look, we've resurrected Buena Vista Winery; the winery is better than it's ever been. Raymond ... is four times its size. The Ink House, that beautiful hotel we bought, is more spectacular than ever.

If I'm an inspirational, passionate, energetic dreamer, that's exactly who I think I should be. President, CEO, leader, all that is great words that don't belong to me, but to an MBA school that I don't even belong to.



## What's your opinion about the future of the U.S. economy?

I'm exactly bullish. I think America is the best place to be. The American democracy is the best of all; the system of checks and balances. And the presidential system is fabulous. I feel the world should run their economies the same way America is run.

## What are you doing to attract employees?

What we hope we would be attracting is the engagement of their opinion, engagement of their contribution, that what they say means something and we act on their belief. We hope that we attract excitement and energy, we hope that we attract passion and dreams.

## Do you think wages are the answer to recruiting?

Absolutely no. Our agenda is long term, and we elect to give people a voice and an opinion where people can make a difference.

## What are the benefits and drawbacks to being located in the North Bay?

We need to continue to embrace that spirit of doing, to support our entrepreneurs and encourage creative business. We need to ensure the North Bay has thriving communities with housing that people can afford; we need our local governments to work in partnership with business that seek to make this a better place, where sometimes we feel we are more challenged by them than supported.

## **If you could change one government regulation, what would it be?**

In certain wine regions in Northern California the connection to food and wine is sorely missed. Many places suggest that a winery should not offer food to pair with wine. We believe this needs to evolve as wine and food are best together, and the enjoyment of wine should never be about drinking, alone, but rather the cultural experience of wine and food together.

## **What other acquisitions are you eyeing?**

And we have high ambitions. We keep adding, and we keep bringing more elements to our culture, more phenomenal, visionary ideas that make us a better place than yesterday. Our journey is not complete.

## **Do you want to share with NBBJ readers what those acquisitions will be?**

No, because I want you to call me every week because we're going to feed you with new ideas.

## **What do you see in the boutique hotel industry?**

Enormous potential because people change their traveling habits. We have elected to want to be in smaller homes, extended homes, be received and live like the people who own the homes. That's why the house my wife and I acquired, that beautiful home in the Napa Valley, so you could rent several rooms, all the rooms of the hotel and spend time with your friends at a private chef or yourself cook in the kitchen and live as a Victorian home owner in the heart of St. Helena on Highway 29.

I think people want unique experiences, they want to be part of the landscape, the fabric and the experience of the Wine Country, or the beach, or the mountains or nature. It's all about experiential today, much more than transactional.

## **How is your wife, Gina Gallo, involved in the Boisset Collection?**

Gina is my muse and a source of creative energy. We love to blend wine, discuss wine, and share in the life of wine, but our business remains entirely separate as she has a very successful career in the wine world with her family winery.

## **Do you foresee your twin daughters one day being involved in the wine industry?**

We of course would adore it. But they will find the path to their wine world their own way, as their mother and I both did.

## **What advice would you give someone just starting his or her career in your industry?**

Be curious, be audacious. Try it all and meet as many people as you can. The wine world is an inspiring one that rewards those passionate and committed. Wine is never a job, it is a life. Embrace it.