

Forbes

Making Wine With John Legend And Vintner Jean-Charles Boisset In Napa Valley

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JUL 2, 2018



Grammy and Oscar-winning John Legend created his own wine label LVE, Legend Vineyard Exclusive in 2015 in a collaboration with Napa-based Raymond Vineyards. The partnership with Raymond Proprietor Jean-Charles Boisset and Winemaker Stephanie Putnam has opened up an entirely new world for the acclaimed singer.

Raymond has wineries in Napa and France and is also the largest wine producer in Burgundy. Legend had always wanted to create a wine label where he could be hands-on and heavily involved in the process from blending to labeling. He connected with Raymond Vineyards owner Jean-Charles Boisset through a co-worker, and the two immediately hit it off.

It was a hot Northern California day as I made my way through winding roads to St. Helena in the Napa Valley and the location of Raymond Vineyards for lunch with Jean-Charles. The place was bustling with preparations for a private charity dinner that night with a performance by John Legend for Napa's elite as a fundraiser to help with the recent fires in the area.

Meeting Jean-Charles is an adventure unto itself. Dressed impeccably in designer shoes, colorful blazer, shirt and bejeweled brooch, he is a bundle of enthusiasm and contagious spirit. He is a bit like the elegant Willy Wonka of Napa Valley with his outrageous but refined style. Even his wine production rooms are dramatically lit with colored flair including chandeliers and elaborate artwork.

We were joined by Stephanie Putnam in the elaborate private lounge which was filled with leopard prints, gold brocade, and velvet. Nothing really fits and yet everything is perfect for this eccentric and very successful vintner. We were to have a private blending session with John Legend at his estate later in the day, but for now, it was all JCB.

His JCB Collection includes over 35 different wines from all over the world. Jean-Charles heads up a large empire of more than 25 wineries and vineyards in France, California and Canada.



Raymond Vineyards
Jean-Charles Boisset in the Salon Prive at Raymond Vineyards

He has created his own line of food products through his Yountville based Atelier Fine Foods and a line of JCB spirits including Vodka and Gin cultivated from Pinot and Chardonnay grapes in Burgundy and a pair of vodkas from caviar and truffle. And I wouldn't be surprised if we saw a JCB Boutique Hotel in the near future. The perfect place to showcase his amazing taste for modern art.

And the LVE line just announced the Summer release of LVE Côtes de Provence Rosé available at *Héritage* in Beverly Hills and also by joining the LVE Collective wine club. The grapes for LVE Rosé were grown in the Montagne Sainte-Victoire region of Provence in France and joins the growing lineup of popular LVE wines, including a Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Red.

Jim Dobson- What made you decide to take over Raymond Vineyards?

Jean-Charles Boisset- "Stephanie and I were together hand in hand to rebuild Raymond and bring it back to its former glory. The two Raymond brothers were retiring, one was 79 the other one was 72 and we wanted to keep the Raymond name because of its history in the region. We thought it was very important to keep this American tradition. I also own Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma, which has been a very significant winery over the years and it's really where American wines started. I'm a huge fan of American history a huge fan of American lifestyle that's why I'm living here."

JD- What is your most acclaimed wine?

JCB- "Through the years we have crafted vintages with a lot of elegance to it and we became very well known for that. Stephanie crafted *Generations*, which is a wine that I believe is one of the top five best wines in Napa Valley. It's called *Generations* because it really represents the history of five generations of making wine. It's elegant and it's refined. It's definitely California."

JD- What made you decide to get into business with John Legend?

JCB- "When I first met with John and his wife Chrissy, they told me they really wanted to make wine and then we came here and we did it together. John was involved and interested from the beginning. We both wanted to make something very melodious as well, so we were blending wine and drinking while John was playing on the piano. The first wine we made with John was a Cabernet. His personal style was very much like *Generations* and Rutherford and he came to the vineyard and tasted everything."

Following our lunch and tasting it was off to Boissets spectacular estate high in the hills above Yountville in the Napa Valley. The 11,500 sq ft. Cliff May mission-style mansion was previously owned by the late Robert Mondavi and when Boisset and his wife Gina Gallo (granddaughter of the late Julio Gallo, co-founder with brother Ernest of E. & J. Gallo) saw the home they immediately fell in love with it. It could have been the 50-foot indoor swimming pool with two Baccarat crystal chandeliers overhead or the expansive 360-degree views of the entire valley that sold them. The home now has become an Alice Wonderland style playground for the couple's young twin daughters with its extravagant collection of modern art and furniture.

An elaborate table was set up for my custom blending session with John Legend. Stephanie Puttnam created a blending session of Saint Helena Cabernet (brightness & upfront freshness), Yountville (savory notes & texture oriented), Rutherford (rich and smooth with grit), Petit Verdot (density that gives it weight). Both John and I had a certain love for Rutherford and our final blend was perfected with just the right percentage and mix. This was my master class in blending with a legend (pun intended) and our final product will be shipped to me with my custom label later this year.



John Legend and his popular LVE Wines

We spent a long time chatting and mixing varietals of wine while chatting about the pending arrival of his new baby and his love of cooking with his wife Chrissy Teigen. Legend is charming, relaxed and at home with this new job as vintner, and his love for wine shows as we embraced and relished every sip during our session.

Jim Dobson: How did you meet Jean-Charles and why did you decide to work together?

John Legend: "We met through a mutual acquaintance and Jean-Charles was hesitant about doing a celebrity thing because you never know how it's going to go. I was ready because I knew what their reputation was. And I feel like when you're working with somebody with this kind of reputation and this kind of attention to detail and quality, I just felt like this was the right kind of vineyard to align myself and I was excited to do it."

JD: What are your favorite wines?

JL: "I am a Cabernet guy. It's my favorite. We wanted to have a range of things available but I wanted to make something that I would love to drink and I would love to give to my friends. I always know how much people like to pair wine and music together and particularly my music and wine. I felt like I wanted something that was in the spirit of who I am as a person, who I am as an artist, and what I like to drink. I felt like there was a lot of connection between those three things and so I feel like we could make something that I felt really passionate about representing."

JD: Does Chrissy enjoy your wines too?

JL: "Chrissy loves the Cabernet. She doesn't like a Chardonnay but likes a lighter white wine and likes more of a Pinot Grigio. She doesn't like having her whites to be as bold and now with the new Rosé we are right on the same page as well."

JD: What was it like when you first started blending for your collection?

JL: "When we first started blending we just kept tweaking...it's just like music. We did at least 10 different blends in the beginning. I usually taste new blends at home while we are cooking and then after dinner time."

JD: Are you really hands-on with the process?

JL: "What I love about this whole process is I feel very connected to the final product. I don't feel like this was just something I slapped my name on because it feels like completely connected to who I am to my experiences of being part of the blending process and to the knowledge of the fact that I actually drink it when I'm home. I was hands-on with everything including labeling and the design of the wine. Love (LVE) is the connection that we established when we decided what the name was going to be. The design expresses love, and of course, we are putting love into everything we are doing with this. When I drink wines I think about Italy a lot. Chrissy and I got married in Lake Como so that's where my heart is."

JD: What are your plans for the future of LVE?

JL: "We have a lot more to do. After the new rose launch, we are going to do a bubbly rose and a sparkling white wine. We are going to do everything together. I also want people to be able to buy it and really enjoy it and buy it en masse and to make it affordable for everyone.

JD: What is your perfect night at home with Chrissy?

JL: "We drink the cabernet and the red blend every night at home when we cook and its just a part of our lives. We cook all the time at the house and yesterday I made Jamaican food. A couple of days ago we made southern creole and soul food. Chrissy is the number one cook and then I did a lot more during the pregnancy just because I didn't want her to stand up all the time, but I'm very good at fried chicken and baked mac and cheese. My daughter loves fettuccine or spaghetti with alfredo sauce and I put some peas and chicken in there. I grew up cooking because my parents got divorced and I lived with my dad when I was 11, so I was used to cooking all the time. My wife is just an expert and she's even got her own books so we love to cook in the house together. It's a very collaborative activity and our wine is always involved.

JD: Any chance you will be moving your newly extended family to start a winery of your own?

JL: "I'm currently discussing with Crissy about buying a place in Napa. It would be exciting to grow our own vines and get our fingers dirty."



Jim Dobson

Blending wines at the home of Jean-Charles Boisset (L to R: Jean-Charles, John Legend, [+]