

Boisset and the 'art of life': Vintner hopes Yountville salon inspires people to dream

Sasha Paulsen spaulsen@napanews.com Updated Apr 4, 2016 0



At this year's Napa Gras, Jean-Charles Boisset's version of a Mardi Gras celebration at his St. Helena winery, the ebullient Frenchman greeted guests from inside a giant Champagne coupe; there he perched amid a cluster of bright balloons, laughing and joking and leaning over the edge of his towering glass to pour wine and pose for photos.

There's no denying that Boisset knows how to have a good time. Boisset, who comes from a winemaking family in Burgundy, first visited California as an 11-year-old boy with his grandparents. He developed a love for California and its winemaking history, and returned to buy and restore the state's first winery, Buena Vista, as well as DeLoach winery in Sonoma County and Raymond Winery in St. Helena. He and his wife, Gina Gallo, also purchased the former home of Robert and Margrit Mondavi.

Since his arrival in Napa Valley, Boisset has captivated his audience — and startled the more prosaic — with his spirited *joie de vivre*. Whether he is inviting guests into his red velvet bordello room at Raymond or the Champagne colored Bubble Room at Buena Vista, or hosting a reception in the style of Louis XIV at DeLoach, one is guaranteed to be dazzled. Also, there is not another winemaker in California who wears better shoes.

Now, Boisset has expanded his hospitable enchantments with the opening of his JCB Tasting Salon and Atelier in Yountville.

His goal, he explained, was to “create the ultimate tasting room. I wanted one place to bring together all the top brands ... a certain savoir faire ... my favorite things.” Including, of course, wine.

The place

The simple gray exterior of Boisset’s new downtown Yountville digs belies the luxurious world awaiting visitors inside, where all is glitter and glamour, tiger skin and sparkling chandeliers. Gleaming cases hold treasures from Lalique and Baccarat crystal, silver pieces from Christofle, porcelain from Bernardaud. Even the umbrellas for sale in a stand are not just, you know, ordinary things to keep the rain off; they are works of art.

“In Yountville we finally have the opportunity to create the full expression of the JCB lifestyle, where wine is at the center of life and surrounded by the accoutrements and extensions of our creative vision,” said Boisset, as he introduced his new creation, much of which he designed himself, to a group of media visitors.

In his salon, those wishing to taste wines from the JCB Collection of French and California wines can recline on plush sofas nestled in a corner or mingle at a long, shining bar. You can also reserve a one-of-a-kind interactive table for four and share your impressions of the wines not just with each other but with, well, the table. It lights up as you press buttons; OK, it’s mesmerizing.

If it is possible to single out the most fascinating aspect of the room, it might be the ornate picture frame that surrounds not just one masterpiece of art but a changing sequence that appears, one after another; each time you look up, it’s a new one, the contents of the Louvre, flashing in front of you while you sip the wine of your choice, an extensive range comprising bubbles from Boisset’s native Burgundy to Mendocino pinot noir.

The Escape Room

Boisset designed the space to create a place “where people can drink and see beautiful things, a place of dreams so that people can be inspired to do the same. I want to make people dream ... and have a great time.”

The ultimate expression of this might be the “Surrealist Room” closed off by glass doors from the main tasting salon. “This room is about the escape,” he explained. “We want people to escape.”

Here art meets wine beneath a huge ornamental eye, and the changing images in the picture frame are Magritte, Dali and Ernst. Cases are filled with jewelry designed by Boisset, and bejeweled bottles of the Surrealist wines. There are candles, decanters and — oh, what is this? In a framed glass box it’s a set of gold handcuffs, a black whip, a mask and choker. Oh my.

“Ah, you have seen my bondage,” said the unflappable Boisset with a laugh. “I saw it in a shop when I was jogging in Beverly Hills. I asked them to hold it while I ran to get my credit card. Already,” he added with a smile, “I have been offered \$20,000 for it.”

“The world of surrealism has possessed me forever as portraying the experience of contrasting worlds,” Boisset said. “Celebrating tradition and modernity, the real and the imagined, the past and the future, consciousness of the self and the other, the inner and outer worlds.”

And gold handcuffs and butterflies.

The Atelier

But wait, there’s more: Another doorway is the entrance to the Atelier. In French, *atelier* means “workshop”; Boisset describes his Atelier as an “epicurean paradise” featuring “products from the best purveyors in the world offering everything imaginable to entice your inner *culinaire*.” It pays homage to “artisan purveyors (who) care for and adore the foods and products they create,” he said.

What will you find? Mustards and caviar, smoked salmon and gorgeous cheeses, pasta, foie gras, charcuterie, olive oil and vinegars. Sourcing the best, Boisset said, means honey from Napa and Sonoma as well as bread flown in weekly from Paris.

“Through wine we have always been in the culinary world and connected to the products of earth and agriculture,” Boisset said. “Our wish is to awaken all the senses and encourage a certain ‘art of life’ always keeping in mind that life is an art, and living elegantly is beautiful and a privilege. Between the kaleidoscope of colors, spices, textures, flavors and scents, we will awaken the passion that lies within all of us.”

Mundane details

The JCB Salon and Atelier by JCB are open daily from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at 6505 Washington St., Yountville. To reserve tastings or for information, call 707-934-8237 or visit JCBCollection.com.

“We want people to come back, and bring friends,” Boisset said. “There is nothing like a dream to create our future.”