

Napa Valley **Register**

Boisset: Wine is only the beginning

Jess Lander Feb 22, 2018 Updated Feb 23, 2018



"Don't box me in!"

This was quite the ironic statement coming from a man who to any outsider, would appear to be anywhere but inside a conventional box.

Jean-Charles Boisset, leader of a wine empire that includes more than 25 wineries and vineyards across France, California and Canada, including Napa Valley's Raymond Vineyards, identifies more a dreamer and an artist than a businessman, despite having gone to business school.

Opting for a daily "uniform" of a designer suit, Louboutin shoes, his signature red socks and a personally-designed decorative brooch from his jewelry collection, he looks more ready for the runway than the cellar. He fills his wineries and tasting rooms with red velvet furnishings, leopard print, mirrors and copious amounts of crystal, and throws lavish parties and dinners that could just as well be happening in New York City or Paris.

Leveraging his own personal style and individuality, Boisset has successfully grown his family's wine business into a towering, sturdy tree that's constantly growing new branches — like a jewelry line, an epicurean boutique, and a new line of spirits and coffee.

The wine is just the roots

So, boxing him in? It's not going to happen. Boisset is not here to play by arbitrary wine industry rules.

"I spent much of my parent's money on school and in many ways, I'm actually doing the opposite of what I've learned. I'm the antithesis," he said. "But we all wholeheartedly believe in what we're doing. Wine is not a recipe."

When he speaks about it in his French accent, it sounds more poetic. But at its core, his life motto is simple: Be who you want to be and do what you love.

"Do I want to make Prosecco?" he asked, rhetorically.

"No."

"Should we make a Prosecco because the category is booming?" he asks again, quickly followed by another resounding, "No."

"I'm not going to sell it with passion and I'm not going to share it with passion," he elaborated. "I really think what's important today is that we do everything because we have the deep conviction that we love it and we're passionate about it. I'm honestly not interested in doing a Prosecco. I have zero interest to drink it. If I start to put in the market something that I don't adore, then why should you believe in me?"

It's another rhetorical question, but one that actually makes a lot of business sense.

Born an artist

"I was born and raised in wine. So truthfully, that's all I've seen all my life," said Boisset. "I've seen three things: nature and the vineyards, I've seen winemaking and I've seen people. Those three things

really make me who I am today.”

He was born in a small village of a mere 176 inhabitants in Burgundy called Vougeot, which he refers to as “The Vatican of Pinot Noir.”

“I was born in a house that my parents still live in, which became the winery. When I was younger, my playground was the vineyards of Vougeot. It was really where I grew up the first 15 years of my life,” said Boisset, recalling days of playing hide and seek among the tanks and barrels that were housed below his bedroom.

And yet while he was born into the wine world, it’s his creativity and originality that he was born with.

“I’ve always had a great creative side. I’ve always loved drawing, rearranging rooms, designing, and creating an environment for people to be in and to evolve in,” he said. “I’ve always dreamed of having a house with 25 rooms and 25 designs — the Chinese room, the Indian room, the French room, the American room, the Italian room.”

Moreover, Boisset’s grandmother, a teacher, fostered his creative side in the garden.

“My grandmother was a huge believer in composting and bees. We were really raised into the cycle of the seasons and eating what the garden had to give you,” said Boisset. “There’s a lot of creativity when you’re in the gardens because plants give you inspiration. I’ve always been inspired by flowers and vegetables, insects, frogs, snails, bees and spiders.”

This is reflected in his JCB jewelry collection, full of bejeweled brooches, necklaces and bracelets that feature characters from nature, like la grenouille (the frog), a rose and of course, grapes.

It was also through his grandmother’s lessons that he derived his passion for organic and biodynamic farming practices. At Raymond Vineyards, he even

developed the two-acre Theatre of Nature, an outdoor educational exhibit on biodynamic farming.

“How could you not in any case believe that nature should treat nature? It’s so obvious,” he said. “Look at

the power of nature. I really believe we should all be immensely respectful of nature, extremely grateful. Whatever we do, nature will prevail."

Creating a lifestyle, not a product

Boisset made his first trip to America at age 11. It was love at first sight.

"I loved it; adored it to the point of me saying, "That's where I want to be, that's where I want to live," he said. "I was very attracted to the amazing people, with very positive energy, who come from every background, every culture, every religion, and there's no rigid environment where you're supposed to be this, or act this way. It's a very open feel and you are who you want to be."

By the early 1990s, he was living in America permanently and looking to grow his family's wine business in the U.S., stating he saw it as, "the best future potential market in the world."

But it wasn't really all about making wine and profiting. He wanted to make his mark by bringing the French lifestyle to the open-minded U.S.

"I saw it more as not a business opportunity, but a very cool to convert people's taste and to help them understand the lifestyle of wine. We think wine is not just wine. It's design, it's jewelry, it's decanters, it's glasses, it's everything around wine that creates this artistic expression of who you are," said Boisset. "It cannot just be the ultimate objective and the only objective, to sell wine. If it's just that, it's too limiting. I really believe we're here to build greater things around wine."

That's where his many projects come in, each more of a personal passion than a business decision (though they work well as both). The JCB Collection of wines for instance, currently features 35 different wines from all over the world, representing Boisset's "dream range" of sparklings, pinots and more.

"We kept wanting to build a collection of very unique wines from multiple destinations. From Burgundy, the Beaujolais, the Rhone and the South of France to Russian River, Sonoma Coast, Napa Valley, Carneros, Santa Lucia Highlands, etc. We've very fortunately built an amazing collection of great terroir," he said.

Each bottle is named with a number that represents a person or memory close to Boisset's heart: 69 for the year he was born, 13 because it's the favorite number of his wife, Gina Gallo, and 34, his age when he acquired DeLoach and began his California journey.

Then last spring, he launched Haute Couture. A pair of French bubbles, a Rose and a Blanc, it enabled U.S. consumers to sip French sparkling wine at an affordable price. Fully cloaked in stylish packaging that features black and gold embossing in a designer, argyle-like pattern, the bottles look much more expensive than they are. Boisset calls the line "the ultimate expression of style."

"We felt we were missing something extremely on the fashion edge, where you can express your style and assert your style, and have a really trendy, cool bottle of wine that is innovative in terms of its packaging," he said. "Haute Couture is the absolute expression of the atelier of the fashion designers in France."

His next project was opening a sort of annex to the JCB Tasting Salon in Yountville, a diversion from most of his other businesses, Salon Privé has a clean and neutral palate; decorated in all white with expansive mirrors, a garden protrudes from the

ceiling, with roses and butterflies hanging down. Acting as a blank canvas, it was designed to inspire guests to "reflect and dream."

After that came a slew of other launches that branch out from wine, yet fit under the umbrella of the French lifestyle that Boisset wants to spread throughout America. He has created his own line of food products available through Atelier Fine Foods — jams, pickles, olives, madeleines and more — and before the new year, he launched the First Growth Grand Cru Napa Valley Coffee Project and a line of JBC spirits. There's a vodka and gin distilled from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes from Burgundy, and also a pair of vodkas infused with two of Boisset's most favorite edible luxuries: caviar and truffle.

Currently, Boisset is exploring locations for a JCB brewery.

"We think beer, the oldest drink on the planet, should be part of who we are," he said. "We want to be involved in the art of every natural product that we

transform and ferment or distill."

Most likely, it won't look anything like the typical taprooms you find in the industrial pockets of most cities, instead outfitted in Boisset's signature flair.

And after that?

"We're working on two to three things," Boisset said with a sly smile, indicating it's not for public release just yet.

One thing is for sure: Whatever it is, it definitely won't come in a box.