

# The Press Democrat

## Speaking at Spirited conference, North Coast vintner says \$150 for a bottle of vodka is worth it

**BILL SWINDELL**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | February 27, 2018,



Taking a page from the wine industry by selling premium bottles at higher prices, vintner Jean-Charles Boisset is betting the same trend applies to the craft spirits business.

His JCB Collection debuted last year with a gin infused with 44 herbs, spices and biodynamic plants as well as a vodka made from wine sourced with grapes from Burgundy and then distilled seven times.

The result? The gin and the vodka retail at \$125 per bottle. Vodka bottles infused with caviar and truffles go for \$150 a pop.

"I think it's very important that we change the dynamic. White spirits don't have to be less than \$40. Gin doesn't have to be less than \$60. We need to push it. Think luxury. Think success," said Boisset during the Spirited International Spirits Trade Tasting & Show held Tuesday at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds.

The conference was sponsored by Spirited magazine, part of Sonoma Media Investments, the same company that owns The Press Democrat.

During a keynote speech, Boisset noted that when he came to the United States in 1981, wines were not sold above \$10 per bottle.

"Today, the wine category that is flourishing the most is over \$20, \$30, \$50, \$100 (a bottle). This is the future," he said.

Boisset, who is married to Gina Gallo, the senior director of winemaking at Ernest and Julio Gallo Winery, has had success as proprietor of the Boisset Collection, the family-owned enterprise that owns wineries in France as well locally with the Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma and DeLoach Vineyards in Santa Rosa.

---

He has followed other local wine companies that have moved into the spirits industry such as Purple Wine and Spirits in Graton and Vintage Wine Estates of Santa Rosa.

High-end (\$20 to \$30) and super premium (more than \$30) spirits are driving growth for distillers, representing 54 percent of the \$25.1 billion overall spirits market in 2016, according to the Distilled Spirits Council, the industry's main U.S. trade group.

Much of the growth in that segment, however, has been in brown spirits such as whiskey and bourbon, not white ones. Boisset said he wants to change that dynamic, even though he conceded he's "received a ton of resistance" for trying to push for a higher price point.

He argues that the cost of goods for typical distillers is minimal given wheat or corn is much less expensive than the grapes he sources — especially as the fruit is a key driver for rising wine prices. Boisset is not alone in his quest, as Hanson of Sonoma also uses grapes — organic fruit sourced locally — in its vodka that retails at a much more affordable price of around \$25 to \$30 a bottle.

"I want to people to think about the source," Boisset said.

"Think about the ingredients: Burgundy wine. Caviar. Truffles. Let's go crazy for white spirits, not just brown spirits."

The JCB spirits are manufactured to drink without mixtures or ice, just like a brown spirit. The initial production is only 5,000 bottles.

"You want to go very high. You want to sell it like an estate wine," he said.

One local distiller said he was skeptical of how large a market there is for spirits priced more than \$100 a bottle.

"It's hard to break people's habits," said Crispin Cain, president of American Craft Whiskey Distillery in Redwood Valley, noting that those who prefer Jack Daniel's would likely be a tough audience to win over at that price.

The large distillers also have offered their own premium brands, not wanting to cede any ground to the craft upstarts, unlike what happened in the beer industry when the major breweries started losing market share, said Tracy Sheppard, a senior lender in the wine and craft beverage group at Live Oak Bank in Santa Rosa.

"It's challenging," Sheppard said. "The ones with heritage make a very good product."



**(4 of 6)** A bottle of JCB truffle infused vodka sits on ice during the Spirited International Spirits Trade Tasting and Show at the Grace Pavilion at Sonoma County Fairgrounds in Santa Rosa, on Tuesday, February 27, 2018. (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)