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## Decanter Archive

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### Jean-Charles Boisset interview

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*Beverley Blanning*

Beverley Blanning MW meets the innovator set to shake up the wine world even more by blending Côte de Nuits with Californian Pinot Noir

I call him the vampire,' says one of his American employees, 'because I can't figure out when he sleeps.' After a long day at the London Wine Fair, Jean-Charles Boisset is in high spirits, fizzing with enthusiasm about the bar at Claridge's, its crystal cocktail glasses, the quality of the drinks, the staff (all of whom he seems to know by name) and the 'exciting and insane' wine business – all the while responding to a regular stream of messages on his mobile phone.



As the public persona of the vast Boisset empire – Burgundy's largest wine producer and France's third-biggest wine group – Boisset is credited with many of the more radical changes to the business his father Jean-Claude founded in 1961. Jean-Claude rapidly built up a sizeable company comprising numerous wine producers from his Burgundy homeland, Beaujolais and the Rhône.

He also acquired a reputation of a deal-making entrepreneur more interested in establishing a big business than in making quality wine. 'When someone suggested in 2002 I should taste the Boisset wines again, I thought they were joking,' says David Gleave MW of UK importer Liberty Wines. He did so nonetheless and was impressed enough by the changes to buy the wines; he has imported the company's top-level Jean-Claude Boisset label since 2003.

Jean-Claude's son has been responsible for a more consumer-driven, New World approach that has influenced everything from wine quality to sustainability, with plenty of innovative marketing flourishes along the way. Many of Jean-Charles's ideas fly in the face of the hackneyed terroir-based marketing so beloved of the French.

He is one of the few people in the wine world to have made cheap, recyclable packaging a positive selling point. The Yellow Jersey brand (a range of varietal Vins de Pays d'Oc) is packaged in plastic, we are told by marketing, 'for confident, adventurous drinkers that forge new paths, appreciate quality and the environment and champion innovation.'

But not everyone in France shares his enthusiasm for such newfangled ideas. 'When I launched French Rabbit [a range of southern French wines in recyclable Tetra Pak] the Burgundians thought I was mad,' he laughs, although the continued existence of the brand suggests he has brought his family, if not the rest of Burgundy, around to his way of thinking.

Another idea was to bottle Mommessin Beaujolais in a slim, aluminium container featuring a 'cooldot', which changes colour as the wine is cooled to the ideal drinking temperature. Within the even more conservative Côte d'Or, Boisset has embraced screwcaps for the company's top wines – a development welcomed by foreign retailers and his young winemaker, but not a practice acceptable to other large firms in the region just yet.

Of course Boisset is savvy enough to know that it simply wouldn't wash to try to pretend that every one of the vast array of wines in the company's portfolio is the product of a singular terroir. His skill is to match the right story with the right wine. He also exhibits a mercurial ability to speak with equal conviction of the merits of his premier cru Burgundy, bag-in-box California Pinot, Crémant de Bourgogne or any other Boisset wine you mention.

Despite the focus on innovation, historical values and terroir still have important roles to play in the Boisset story. The family has tried to acquire companies with strong history and personality, Jean-Charles tells me – or at least, companies that can be 'crafted in that direction'. Unimpeded by generations of winegrowing baggage himself, he has no qualms about creating a desired image from scratch. 'We didn't have a lot of history, so we had to bring it in,' he admits, without irony. 'Now, if there's no soul, we create it; if there is, we resurrect it. I spend a lot of time defining an artistic direction. With Bouchard Aîné it's all about opulence and 18th-century flamboyance; in Jean-Claude Boisset we're looking for finesse, femininity and sophistication; for Domaine de la Vougeraie it's all about terroir.'

### The ideas man

It's easy to see how others are engaged by Boisset's many enthusiasms. Employees were eager to share their views on their 'hundred-ideas-a-minute' boss, of whom they speak with the fond indulgence usually reserved for a favourite nephew.

Jean-Claude is still at the helm at the Boisset family's Nuits-St-Georges HQ. San Francisco-based Jean-Charles is in charge of the US operation, although he spends much of his time travelling back and forth to Burgundy, managing the company's 20-plus properties. 'I don't try to be everywhere, but I really enjoy putting a lot of effort in certain places,' he says. He sees his role as 'a motivator, the one who has inspiration and vision', likening his position to that of a curator in a gallery, coordinating the efforts of the artists.

While working with winemakers is the part of the business he says he loves the most, his passion for the art of wine does not override a realistic interest in the bottom line: many of the company's winemakers are given incentives based on the ratings their wines receive from critics.

Jean-Charles also seems to have inherited his father's penchant for snapping up wine companies (especially if they are in distress, say industry insiders). He was excited to tell me about his most recent acquisition, Raymond Vineyards in Napa, and the enlargement of the Burgundy business via the purchase of Antonin Rodet, confirmed just days later.

But if Jean-Charles seems a natural successor to his empire-building father, he says the two are very different. 'We don't have a similar outlook,' he claims. 'I'm less process-orientated, less cost-orientated and probably less rigorous. And I'm a different generation. But we get along.' He is quick to point out that the decision-making is still very much a joint affair. 'As a family, you sit around a table and you have to agree. Otherwise, it's not a family, it's just a business.'

Although he was born in Vougeot, in the house where his mother and father still live today, his is not a traditional wine background. He is from a family of teachers not winemakers. When Jean-Charles came into the world, his father's négociant business was a mere eight years old. His mother, fluent in English, encouraged Jean-Charles and his sister Nathalie to travel. 'I've always been tempted by the dream of going beyond the boundaries,' he says.

While he 'always adored wine', he 'never thought I would follow it'. He claims he was far more interested in the arts and sport – contemplating a career as a professional footballer in his youth. It was only in the early 1990s, while studying for his MBA, that he first took an active interest in his parents' business. 'We had a very small office in San Francisco and my parents wanted to get out. I asked them: "Are you sure you want to leave the biggest market in the world?"' They did – or at any rate, weren't interested in managing the office themselves – so Jean-Charles transferred his studies to San Francisco and joined the company. They bought their first winery in California (Lyeth Estate) and gradually built up the business there.

Like all Burgundians, he loves to talk about Pinot Noir: 'As a product, it is by far my

favourite. I've been brainwashed, palate-washed, from age two.' But just as he is animated about the next big idea for packaging his wines, so his excitement for Pinot Noir also seems to be focused on the next big thing: creating new ways of looking at, blending or serving it, or identifying new locations for the grape. 'The next Côte d'Or is Russian River Valley; I have zero doubt about it,' he says.

The company took over the bankrupt De Loach winery five years ago. 'We're not even halfway to where we could be with the quality,' he insists. His latest idea is one guaranteed to cause upset among the Burgundy traditionalists – or indeed anyone who believes the magic of Pinot Noir, more than any other red wine variety, lies in its ability to communicate a sense of the place the grapes were grown in the wines.

'My dream is to blend incredible Pinot Noir from Russian River and the Côte de Nuits,' he tells me, excitedly. It's a dream that is to become a reality soon: 'I'll do it this year. I know it's insane, but I think the end result is going to be beautiful.' His partner in this particular crime is likely to be his new wife, Gina Gallo of the eponymous California empire. Having denied suggestions of such a joint venture a few months ago, he now seems to be considering the idea, volunteering: 'I think it would be romantic to do it with Gina.

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