



Featured Winemaker

A French Visionary



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Jean-Charles Boisset discusses the benefits of putting the planet first.

It's one thing to operate a successful wine company with vineyards in several countries. It's quite another to try to be the most innovative, environmentally friendly winery on the planet--*and* encourage the rest of the industry to follow your lead. Jean-Charles Boisset, president of [Boisset Family Estates](#), has fully embraced the charge.

While the company produces high-end wines that are intended to be cellared for years, Boisset also makes several affordable wines that are made to be sipped as soon as you bring them home. A few years ago Jean-Charles realized that every \$10 wine he made cost \$7 to bottle and transport to the store shelf--and that the environmental cost was even greater.

Today, Boisset is constantly exploring ways to put more money into the wine and less into the big-carbon-footprint packaging. His [Fog Mountain Merlot](#) comes in lightweight plastic bottles that can be recycled into T-shirts, and his [French Rabbit](#) brand is sold in light, convenient, paperboard TetraPaks. Among Boisset's latest innovations is the [DeLoach California Pinot Noir](#) that 800 restaurants and hotels buy in 10-liter barrels--which has a 99% lower carbon footprint than shipping a normal, nine-liter case of wine.

Jean-Charles promises plenty more eco-friendly endeavors to come. Read on for our full interview with him to see how innovations in the wine world aren't just good for the planet, they can be good for your wallet, too.

Bottlenotes: When and how did you decide the winery needed to reduce its environmental impact?

Boisset: We really started with the conviction that eating local and eating within the season was really the way to go. It came from my strong education in the countryside, which started in Burgundy with my grandparents' parents, and really a true understanding that you need to eat what grows right now. It should be as natural as possible. So when my sister and I started to develop the wine company, we remembered that philosophy of being true to where you are, what you make and how you make it. So the

obvious evolution was to start with the organic and biodynamic farming practices. Then it evolved into managing water systems better. Then electricity. Recycling paper--and using recycled paper. And going toward all the key steps from the vineyard to the winery.

Then we realized the more we do this, the more we realized that the biggest carbon-footprint impact is from the moment we bottle the wine and ship it around the world. We started to realize in 2002 that the biggest trade is wines less than \$10, and the majority of the costs with wines less than \$10 were going to transportation, freight, glass, capsules, and cork costs. And the actual wine itself was the minimal aspect of this.

So how can we drastically convert all that energy and money being spent into the wine itself rather than with whatever is around it--which, ultimately, is counterproductive for the environment. So we realized we needed to look at alternative packaging if we wanted to have a much greater positive impact on the environment. We did big research on all the different packaging and wine that could be packaged alternatively. We realized that in any case, most of those wines less than \$10 are typically drunk very quickly. You're not going to put this wine in your cellar for ten years. So the issue of glass and cork didn't have an impact on those wines because you drink them right away.

We were really the first to come out with each of the innovations--PET bottles, aluminum bottles and TetraPak. It really allowed us to minimize carbon footprint in a huge way, and get the entire wine world to think a little differently and open their eyes. Wine can be great, but it doesn't have to be in heavy glass with a long cork. So then we did an innovation a few years ago, which is a very attractive barrel that we make either for restaurants/hotels or for consumers. It's a ten-liter eco-bag inside the barrel, and for consumers it's three or five liters. So you have a very high-quality wine in the least-carbon-footprint impact ever in the history of wine. That's the one I like the most because we slide it into the barrel--it's an unfiltered and unfiltered wine, which we fill directly from one barrel to the other, and we ship it around the country. We are in 800 restaurants, and it's fascinatingly successful. The carbon footprint is 99% less than a regular case of wine. And it keeps the wine fresh for three months. There are no oxidation or cork-taint issues, so it takes spoilage away from the actual pleasure.

How much has your carbon footprint been reduced as a whole? We'd have to calculate it, but I would imagine that if we count the hundreds of thousands of cases we've sold, I would say it's quite dramatic. It's certainly the highest level of any company in the wine world today. And the beauty of it is we're now launching light-glass formats and all kinds of different things, which are pulling the whole industry into this thought process. And that's the key: It's one thing to do something and be successful; it's another to catalyze energy around an idea.

We really run an open book on it. We're basically the opposite of Apple computers. Any winery who has a question, we answer it and say, "Go here, go there. This is how you can do it, this is what we've learned and these are the mistakes we've made."

What are some of those mistakes or things you tried that weren't received well or didn't catch on? We've had a little of all of the above. My philosophy of innovation is you have a great idea and you try it, and if it's not 100% perfect, you don't test it for 15 years--go at it and correct it with the trade and the consumers.

We've perfected, now, TetraPaks in terms of bottling and sealing it--same with PET bottles and aluminum bottles. All along the way, to be very honest, we've had issues that we've corrected and have pretty much perfected. Same with barrel-to-barrel--we had a few issues on oxidation and leakage. When you do something new and so outside of the norm, you always have a few production issues or issues over six to nine months that you don't expect. So we've been really frank with everyone and said, "If you have any problems, we'll replace it." But we haven't had any issues in a long time now.

What have we learned? A lot of people are ready to go for an alternative package as long as it's convenient. People don't use it because it's environmentally correct. We realized very quickly in our tagline, which was at first "Ecological, convenient and value-oriented," we had to change them to,

"Convenient, value-oriented as well as then, and only thereafter, ecological." I believe people buy our different packaging for different reasons.

Take TetraPak. People who buy those are into boating, the outdoors, stadiums, tailgating all that. Obviously the light glass is the easy one, because you don't see the difference. People could buy light glass without knowing that it's environmentally better.

Ultimately what I would say on this chapter of innovation: It's always easier to follow; it's always harder to innovate and create something new. Our interest is to lead, to try and to take consumers to another level and learn from them.

What's the one part of your carbon footprint that's the most difficult to eliminate or reduce? What's been the toughest nut to crack?

I'm not sure we've cracked any yet. I think we're only starting. Only 15 years ago we started it on the farming side. We need to progress on the winery side. The biggest for me is the packaging side, since this is where the carbon footprint is the greatest. On barrel-to-barrel, the improvement on the packaging front is 99%. Imagine if all the wine sold by the glass in the U.S., which could be 80 million cases, if 50% of that 80 million cases was served in a more environmentally friendly fashion it would be an enormous savings on carbon footprint.

The key is we need to continue having conversations like you and I are having now in order to improve what we're doing. We need to be patient, and make great wine. At the end of the day, people will start to say, "As long as the liquid is great, I'm ready to try the wine in this presentation."

So I would say that the biggest nut to crack is the packaging issue, since that's the biggest impact. When you think about a wine from the south of France, we ship all the way to Japan and India and California. For a bottle of wine at \$10, 70% of that cost is everything but the wine. We need to reverse that. We just need to put more investment into the quality of the wine, and less into the packaging side of things.

What are your thoughts on PET plastic bottles? You started with them pretty seriously a couple years ago, but not much else has happened with them since.

I was raised with milk and fruit juice in TetraPak, and water in PET. So when you're raised with high-quality water like Volvic and Evian in PET, for me, it's always been a natural evolution that wine you're not going to keep forever should be in PET. We mastered a great bottle shape of a 750 ml and a one-liter in PET--you can barely see the difference. We did a lot of research, and have invested in the oxygen barrier and the double layer, which allows wine to be kept in the bottle for 20 months.

We've worked very hard at it, but unfortunately the trade has never been behind it. And the consumer's never been able to see the true advantage. We still have one wine, Fog Mountain, an organic Merlot in one-liter. It's \$12 on the shelf, so 33% more wine for free, and with seven of those PET bottle you make a Patagonia T-shirt. What I like is the full-circle recycling process. It actually creates another product.

In France, we recycle the screw-caps on water bottles to make wheels for handicapped chairs. This is where the wine world needs to be stronger innovators. We need, as a whole industry, to think about how we, at every step of the way, can make our world a better place.

What's the next big, green-friendly package or plan you have in the works?

The biggest thing, is the barrel-to-barrel. Next year we're going to make a big push with the three-liter barrel for consumers. The wine quality is stunning and it keeps for a long period of time. The beauty of this concept is that it allows you to keep the wine fresh and crisp.

But we also have a really exciting experience at [Raymond in Napa Valley](#), which we bought a year ago. We're doing a whole theater of nature--basically engaging consumers. It's all kinds of things on a three-acre property where we're actually showing all the interactions of nature, the ecosystem, what the world around us is about, and what it's about--and teaching what is sustainable, what is organic and what is biodynamic.

It will be the first time I know of at any winery, anywhere, where there's a dedicated space to educate people on the environmental issues. When you talk about environment, you talk about health. The biorhythms of nature are the same as the ones inside of our own bodies. The more people learn about the ecosystem, the more they learn about themselves.

We're showing the whole organic matrix, and why organic farming is great even for a tomato. A tomato has a huge level of antioxidants and is very good for you. A tomato organically farmed versus a tomato full of pesticides is very different from its taste to its nutrients. We're going to represent, graphically and physically what we're all about.

It's a big investment and it's going to be free of charge. You get headphones and walk around as if it's a science museum, and you go at your own pace. (Early next year we'll have an iPhone and iPad application.) We have animals, too--chickens, goats, sheep, bats, owls. We're planting a tree to attract certain kinds of insects, and we're making all our own compost. This is what we're doing for people to [help them] really visualize what the world is about, and more importantly how it impacts them, and what are the health benefits. Organic equals health.