

## Turning the Wine World on its (Rabbit) Ear

By Matthew Wheeland

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**Innovation; Packaging;**

The world of wine is in an interesting place, from an environmental standpoint. It is perched between several contradictions: it's perceived as a luxury item that many shoppers won't pay a premium for (viz. the rise of Trader Joes' Charles "Two Buck Chuck" Shaw label); it's an organic product that benefits and suffers from the same high-tech agricultural methods as conventional produce; and it's produced by people who as a rule are a profoundly tradition-minded group but wedded to those same methods.

Like every industry, the wine business is feeling its way forward on addressing its own environmental impact, even as it faces one of the largest challenges of any industry: as the climate changes, a winery can't simply uproot and move to a new location where it can grow its traditional varieties of grapes.

What the wine business can and can't do about the larger concern of climate change is a story in and of itself, but at our Greener By Design conference in Virginia last month, one of our panelists discussed exactly what his wineries are doing to shrink its environmental footprint.



Boisset's Yellow Jersey Wine, packaged in a PET bottle.

**The Boisset Family Estates**, a nearly 50-year-old family-owned winemaker, based in France but spreading worldwide, has taken on a handful of innovations in its business practices that are designed to benefit the environment, its customers and the company's own bottom line.

In addition to CSR practices including partnerships with Surfriders and the Forest Association, the Boisset Family Estates have incorporated some significant changes to the customer-facing elements of its business.

**Boisset's Yellow Jersey** label looks very much like a traditional bottle of wine, but the bottle itself is made of PET plastic; and its **French Rabbit** label travels even further afield: comes in a distinct TetraPak box and includes two "ears" (hence the name) that allow customers to tie off the box and save the wine for several days on end.

These innovations and others are designed to sidestep the traditional practices of the wine world, which as often as not are counterproductive from a cost and environmental perspective. The vast majority of wines are drunk within 3 hours of purchase, and although they are often aged for several years, that can happen just as well in TetraPak as in glass. Glass is possibly the least efficient of all possible packages for wine: heavy and very fragile, it adds significantly to shipping and breakage costs.

But customers – and more importantly, wine retailers – are resistant to change from the traditional packaging, although Jean Charles Boisset, the vice president of Boisset Family Estates, ticks off no shortage of benefits to alternative wine packaging, including the ability to sell more wine for the same cost by saving on shipping, increased recyclability, decreased resource use in production and recycling, and better methods of keeping wine fresh once opened.

In a wide-ranging interview at the conference, I spoke with Boisset about some of its innovations, the challenges they've faced in bringing the product to market, and how to create change in a tradition-minded industry like wineries. Here is an edited transcript of that conversation.

**Matthew Wheeland:** With regards to making change in an industry as rooted in history and in place as the wine industry -- or the wine world as you called it earlier – what are some of the biggest obstacles that you've faced so far?

**Jean Charles Boisset:** Well, the usual resistance is tradition. Tradition. I've been doing that for two centuries – why should I change? This is lovely. This is attractive. This is emotional. The values are well established. Why should I change?

So the biggest resistance comes from the people within the trade. I realize everywhere I go around the world it's not necessarily the consumers. The consumers most of the time are ready to give it a try.

The consumer is clever. He or she gets it, if it's properly explained to them. And they come back to it. The key is the hurdle of opening that door and being allowed within the club. We are in the club because we obviously produce a lot of fine wines. I don't have a problem getting an appointment. Where I have a problem sometimes is to manage, as I said today at the panel, is rejection. I've had so many you cannot imagine.

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I do a lot of business, and people I know say, “Jean-Charles, I love the business you’re doing, but I believe it’s too early for me. I don’t believe in it.” Or, “I believe I don’t get it.” Or, “I believe my consumer won’t get it.”

And then what little hair I have on my head stands up and I say, “Well, your people? Are you Jesus Christ? You exactly know what your consumer wants and how all of your wines are moving? I didn’t know you were spending so much time in your store. Do you interview these customers – Do you know them that well?”

And then obviously I challenge them in a nice way and they say, “You may be right. Maybe I should give it a try.” All I ask is that they give me ten square feet of their, say, 2,000 square foot store. I’m not asking for the whole store. Give me the opportunity to try.

So if I can talk to them that way they give me a chance or if they give us a chance as a team typically it tends to start to work. As long, though, as you properly merchandise it and you explain. The consumer is willing to buy anything as long as you tell them why they should buy it. And the key issue and the resistance we’re getting is often lack of space, lack of trust, lack of display activity.

There’s nothing wrong to drinking out of a TetraPak or an aluminum bottle or a PET bottle when you do a barbecue outside. Why would you even want to bring a heavy glass bottle at the poolside or Jacuzzi, or when you go on a hike. And then you need a corkscrew, and you’re gonna have to carry it back because you don’t want to throw it away in nature. I mean, why? When the wine is the same? Why?

**MW:** It sounds like the wines are definitely starting to make some inroads, though...

**JCB:** Indeed. Indeed. We’ve recently been having some good support from a lot of larger retailers finally. Target began selling the wine as of June 1; Wal-Mart through Sam’s Club may be starting as well; and Whole Foods has done some displays. A lot of independent stores have also started.

And as the large retailers move into it, it’s great for them because they’re becoming a better, more eco-friendly company. And No. 2, they’re innovators and there’s nothing wrong of being an innovator. I think it’s fun to be an innovator. It’s tough, it’s hard work, it’s a lot of convincing work. But what’s more exciting than to make a consumer evolve in their thinking on traditional products?

**MW:** So you’ve got the consumers as one angle. You’ve got retailers as another angle. And then moving into the producers themselves. There are at least two sides to that coin where how are other winemakers that you interact with reacting to the new packaging just as a starting point.

**JCB:** Well, some of them think it’s great. Some of them think I’m crazy. Some of them think it’s sacrilege. Some of them think specifically with the profile of wine we make that I’ve gone crazy. And a lot of them thought so when I was moving very seriously into organic farming and into biodynamic farming or into more sustainable winemaking.



The French Rabbit display case

I feel people in our world are very resistant to change. You need to open their eyes. You need to inspire them. So along those lines more and more people are starting to see the advantage. Obviously more and more people need to be shown the advantage, shown the saving from the supply side. Not economic saving. Environmental saving. I mean the financial saving is important but not the key. I think the key is to make an impact for the planet.

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We know we are going in the wrong direction today. We know we are excessive in waste and packaging, in energy use, etc., etc. We all know it. So we need to realize it. We make our livings from an agricultural product. If we as winemakers are not waking up and are not becoming responsible, who will be? It's certainly not a consumer living in New York City or Paris who can have the same awareness as we do.

So if we don't show the way, who will? We want to wait until the government tells us, "You have to do it that way." I don't think it's a very responsible, I don't think it's a very leadership approach. So a lot of people are applauding these innovations.

Some people are still skeptical which is fine. As long as they understand or they give a chance – I have no problem someone disagreeing with me as long as they are open to the dialogue. I think if you have a dialogue and you disagree, that's great. There's a debate. There's an exchange of information. You may like it. You may not like it. I respect you immensely if you at least listen. At least be open-minded.

So more and more people are open minded. More and more people understand the evolution and the deterioration of the planet and more and more people believe that we should do something. They just don't know what. And they think it's only a portion of the answer.

And I say to them, you know, if it's 1 percent of the answer at least I've done 1 percent. Instead of sitting down and eating in a three star Michelin restaurant and drinking fine wines with beautiful china. That's great but I'm not solving anything. At the end of the day the culture of the United States has been based on action. This country is where it is because it acts. It moves forward.

So all the vintners I encourage to come together, think about more sustainable way to farm, which they are really moving into. I'm very excited about that. We're just on the beginning of it but now a lot of them are moving now, which is great.

I think we are moving there – I'm not worried about it. I think it will get eventually there. We've made a much better package than what we launched with, and I hope today is just a stepping stone to something better, better for all of us.

**MW:** You have to start somewhere for sure, and it sounds like there are multiple places for winemakers to begin, Whether it's looking at their packaging, farming practices, what have you. Obviously you're doing a lot in terms of packaging, but tell me a little bit about what you've done with your farming.

**JCB:** Well, after the Second World War in Burgundy, France there was a big shift – we've moved into a more intensive program. We've moved into a more directional, productive system, where productivity was key. We moved to a mindset where we prioritized yields and techniques that would favor high productivity, mechanization etc. All of which is fine, as long as you reason your action.

What we maybe have moved away from is the soil, is the actual land and the actual quality of what we want to do. And I believe over the last 15 years specifically in the region I'm from as well as in some other key world region of wine, people have become much more aware of what should be done and literally coming back to old practices which are really basic.

I mean I'm not reinventing anything. I'm just adopting practices where I respect the soil; so I use, as an example, much less equipment so that the soil is not compacted. The roots can go deep. There is better irrigation. There is better, you know, contact of water going down. There's better insect life.

Insect life is very positive for farming – you know it's like a metabolism to the earth. You need to have insects. One example: When we started to use horse plowing, it resulted in excess of 50 insects coming back to the soil, which were great for the roots because they fed each other, and all of which created a great microorganism program.

So it's really going back to basics. Don't get me wrong: I love modernization; there's a lot of great things added to the evolution of life from technology. In agriculture we live with a planet which has a rhythm, so organic farming is really respecting the rhythm of mother nature. Not imposing on her my life and my 8:00 to 5:00 job, but to work within the lunar calendar, to respect the moon cycle, the sun vis-à-vis the earth.



French Rabbit Cabernet Sauvignon

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There's a whole system here, that there are better times to cultivate rather than others. When it's full moon, ascending moon, descending moon. It has an effect on human being. It has obviously an effect on the plant. A dramatic effect, if you do certain things at certain times. It's so obvious, but unfortunately we moved away of the basics.

So what I recommend is as simply as being true, being pure, minimizing intervention, minimizing a lot of the synthetic products like pesticides, herbicides. All that is torturous to the planet and to the human body. I mean I don't want to serve you a glass full of pesticides and herbicides. I mean this is dramatic. I mean if you were to analyze it I'm sure you have a lot of components you would never want to have in your body.

So my recommendation and what we've done is really listening to the rhythm of nature. To her rhythm, her dynamics and from there starting as well to treat the vineyards with plants. From her environment. As simply as at Deloach Vineyards, we have a half an acre garden of plants to treat the vineyards. We don't use pesticides. Why? We use instead molecules of all kinds to do different things. We use natural things like vervain, chamomile, and all those kinds of plants to treat our vineyards and we spray those on it instead.

There's nothing more basic, when you think about it, to treat yourself and the plants with other surrounding plants. I know it sounds like a big revelation to a lot of people and they say, "Oh, yeah? Why not? Isn't it how we've always done it?"

**MW:** Well, that's what I wanted to ask was you talk about going back to basics. And these nonorganic techniques have been around for maybe 50 years; maybe 60 years. We adopted those so quickly I guess partly because it is an easy solution.

**JCB:** It's so easy.

**MW:** Do you see much shifting of that trend back toward going back to the basics?

**JCB:** We have to because the ingredients are deviating. It's great to have productivity. It's great to be able to treat our vineyards in two hours instead of six. At the end of the day, what's the physiology of your grapes? What's the taste profile? What's the flavor profile? What's the thickness of the skin? What are the pits bringing? What's the juice of that grape? How good of a wine is it gonna make?

I'm using grapes because it happens to be what I make but you could talk about a tomato, salads. You could talk about any kind of plant. So a lot of movements are eating locally. That's obvious. Why bring tomato from around the world? Eat the best thing you have in that area.

So I'm really for very true agriculture: being able to look at yourself in the mirror. I mean how easy is it to just dump spray, and decide that you're not gonna have any herbs. But herbs around the roots bring competitions, brings stress. Stress is good for vineyard. The roots go deeper. It brings more diversity into the flavor profile. It's great.

So why have a vineyard which is looking like a pharmacy or clinical type of a location? You want a vineyard to look like a happy environment. You want the plants to be excited, happy, feel comfortable. This is why I'm really for just being true to ourselves. Just being basic. Being simple. Let's not complexify life when it can be easy.

**MW:** And thinking about all the different elements of your agriculture practices – you currently have 22 vineyards. Are you expanding, and what do you do when you take on new vineyards?

**JCB:** We are expanding, and a lot of the ones we've taken on, the last example obviously that comes to mind for me in the U.S. is the Deloach Vineyards. We've acquired vineyards, we're contracting long-term vineyards, and we are turning them to organic farming.

The first day I bought Deloach Winery, I had two trucks of natural compost coming in to change the natural practices and to give life back to the soil. The soil was half dead. Compacted. Full of pesticides. Full of all kinds of chemicals you never want to see in your soil.

If you kill your soil you kill the breathing mechanism of your plant. So we did it very concretely and the grapes have never been happier. The wine quality is improving. And I will show you in the next five years, ten years, the wine will consistently be better.

**MW:** I was going to ask how you keep up with demand if the supply, and by supply I mean organically grown vineyards, don't exist, but it sounds like you're also looking at rehabilitation. You're taking existing vineyards, making them greener.

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**JCB:** Converting them is one of our key missions for the value of our company. It's clearly outlined. We have a responsibility, which comes from beyond us. Beyond my P&L. Beyond my financials. Beyond my margins. Vis-à-vis the people working with us. Just to be true making fine wines. Beyond the planet I was given. I was very lucky, and I'm very lucky today, to be able to farm vineyards.

So my mission and our mission as a company is indeed to respect the land and to convert more and more vineyards every day into sustainable. And if it's a grower who doesn't feel, you know, capable or inclined to move right away into fully certified organic, have him move into sustainable. Instead of doing, you know, five different sprays a year, have him do three. And see how it goes. And make him or her feel comfortable.

We're not here to say we're gonna change the world overnight. It will never happen. But progressively show them results we're having with our own wines. Because I'm doing it with, you know, the 1,000 acres we have so I'm putting literally my actions where my words are. They are being converted into organic farming. Have them come, visit, see how we do things. We have a hotline where they can call in and vineyard managers they can be comfortable and ask advice.

And slowly but surely move into this organic world, if they choose to, if they feel comfortable. And a lot of them have moved into organic and now they want to go even a step further. And I can tell you that as they move into they, they are enjoying it.

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