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Rooted in France, eyeing the world

A major wine player banks on emerging regions

By Jon Bonné
 MSNBC
 Updated: 4:46 p.m. ET Sept. 16, 2004

As France's third-largest wine company, Boisset should have its hands full at home — tending to more than two dozen wine properties.

Why, then, does this family-run wine conglomerate have such a keen eye on the New World — not just the United States but Canada, Chile and even Uruguay?

As Jean-Charles Boisset, president of its U.S. operations and son of founder Jean-Claude Boisset, describes it, its expansion plans are simply a matter of finding optimal terroir, and optimal business opportunities, wherever they exist.

Mix in a dose of conviction about the virtues of French winemaking skill, and its ability to bring out the regional virtues of

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grapes the world over, and you sense what the Boissets intend with their latest projects, including last year's \$17 million purchase of Sonoma's De Loach Vineyards.

"We as a family have always believed that California has great potential for wine," says Jean-Charles. "Of course, it's young, but I was not around in the 12th century when Burgundy was developed."

Like many French winemakers, Boisset has detected the onrushing scent of the new. With their corporate claim staked in the Burgundian town of Nuits St. George, pinot noir is in their blood.

The French connection

That helps explain why they have been seen so frequently in emerging regions for pinot. In California's Russian River, they bought out bankrupt De Loach and have begun to revive it, complete with new winemaker Greg La Follette, who made his reputation crafting California pinots at wineries such as Flowers. The De Loach family still retains some of their vineyards, but Boisset has given the winery a dose of French tradition.

Open-topped wooden fermentation vats are being shipped from Burgundy. De Loach's 450 acres of vineyards —

larger than all the vineyards in Nuits-St.-George — are being split into more than 800 tiny parcels, all the better to tinker with grape-growing techniques. By next year, some vineyards will be farmed biodynamically, using beyond-organic methods honed in France.

California is only the beginning. In Ontario, Boisset paired with Canadian wine giant Vincor to create Le Clos Jordan, dedicated to high-end pinot. The new winery, designed by architect Frank Gehry, will provide postmodern digs for making expectantly traditional pinot noir. Boisset's Chilean venture, Veranda, is also producing pinot — as well as carmenere, on which the country has begun to stake a claim.

The expansion may serve to grow local thirsts for wine, and to

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provide wines that help balance the publicly-held company's portfolio. And these new locales are starting to collect buzz. British drinkers have signaled some favor for Uruguayan tannat, a rustic grape more commonly found in the country wines of southern France. Partnering with the Pisano family, one of Uruguay's top wine producers, the Boissets are turning out tannat — as well as pinot — under the Viña Progreso label.

The Boissets' goal, especially that of U.S.-educated Jean-Charles, is not simply to sell American wine to American drinkers, and so on, but to whet palates worldwide, to blend the potential of New and Old World and sell all their wines globally.

'Star power'

It wouldn't be the first time Boisset rewrote the rules. Allen Meadows of Burghound notes that its premier Burgundy winery, Domaine de la Vougeraie, was created when they merged four down-and-out properties in the late 1990s.

	<p>MORE ON THE WINE INDUSTRY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wineries seek second homes• Tasting low-carb wine• Sparkling wine, now in a can• More plans to ditch the cork	<p>"They kind of took an American concept of creating a star power," Meadows says. "They didn't have a star label before, so they created one."</p>
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Echoes of that strategy can be seen on these shores. Many of the firm's U.S. holdings — sometimes known for middlebrow wines — have tried to shine up their reputations, crafting new, pricier bottlings and improving their value lines.

De Loach is doing away with many varietals and focusing on its strengths, though its white zin isn't vanishing yet. Lyeth, Boisset's California Bordeaux-style producer, has a new reserve along with its popular \$10 L d'Lyeth label.

The hope is that the mix of vineyard-focused French technique and New World terroir result in pleasant, affordable wines for everyday drinking, and maybe some high-quality standouts.

"Ultimately, it depends on the wine style and how the wine tastes," says investment consultant Robert Nicholson of International Wine Associates. "Pinot noir from Uruguay? Why not, if you can do it right."

Getting in the game

Boisset must also face its shareholders. It has been criticized in the past for rapid expansion and for playing hardball, in part because of its roots as a négociant, trading in other peoples' grapes.

And while large wine firms — Penfold's in Australia, Nicholson notes — have successfully marketed both table wine and masterpieces without diluting their brands, bigger isn't necessarily better.

But Boisset prides itself on economies of scale, leveraging a unified sales and distribution staff to sell its entire range of labels. The global approach may give Boisset enough balance in its portfolio of brands to tangle with growing competition.

French wines face an uphill fight in the United States, with sales down 12.9 percent in the past year to just 1.7 percent of the total market, according to ACNielsen. The French have finally matched the Australians with their own collection of cutesy, fruity bottlings — including new Red Bicyclette label, made for Gallo by a Languedoc cooperative.

Jean-Charles, like many a wine executive, hopes to persuade Americans to adopt that European belief in wine as an everyday pleasure. "I don't think I can, literally, have a decent meal without a bottle of wine," he says. "It's like kissing a woman with no lips."

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