

# THE WINE NEWS

## feature story



Boisset's acquisition of DeLoach seemed almost predestined. Jean-Charles Boisset, pictured at left with Michael DeLoach, found much in common with DeLoach's focus, Pinot Noir philosophy and French heritage.

### DeLoach Renewal - Boisset brings a breath of French air to the Russian River property

*By Jeff Cox*

Jean-Claude Boisset launched what was to become a storied career by selling wine door-to-door in his native Burgundy. That was 1961. Today the firm Boisset subsequently founded is the second biggest exporter and third largest producer of fine wine by volume in France. His astounding success story encompasses holdings across France and beyond. Yet it is Boisset's vision of the future that is most intriguing.

Together with his children, Jean-Charles and Nathalie, the Boissets are seeking out pinot noir and chardonnay vineyards around the world. "Our strategy is to become the leading ambassador of pinot noir and chardonnay in the world by identifying the highest quality terroirs around the planet," Jean-Charles says. "Burgundian winemakers have learned a lot about these varieties from more than 1,000 years of experience, and there are many opportunities outside of Burgundy to apply this knowledge."

They are forging ahead through both direct purchases and joint ventures, but the project prerequisites include more than a Burgundian sense of place. The family focuses on farming its vines sustainably everywhere, organically wherever possible, and biodynamically where it owns the land. "We believe these methods enhance the expression of terroir from quality vineyards," Jean-Charles says. "We want to apply Burgundian winemaking techniques to make sure the wines capture that terroir. Then we want to use Boisset's marketing reach to sell the products of these efforts around the world."

Since 1997, the family firm, headquartered in Nuits-Saint-Georges, has purchased dozens of small- to medium-size boutique wineries and entered into joint ventures in five countries, with more on the way. Taken altogether, these properties form Les Domaines Boisset and are located in France, Canada, Chile, Uruguay and, with the \$17.5 million purchase of DeLoach Vineyards in Sonoma County's Russian River Valley in November 2003, the United States.

"We always wanted a property in California," observes Jean-Charles, president of Boisset-America and vice president of Boisset La Famille des Grands Vins. "As I began researching all the possible [North Coast] areas for pinot noir and chardonnay in 2002 - Carneros, Sonoma Coast, Green Valley - everything always drew me back to the Russian River. The Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from here are superb," he says, citing the wines of Kistler, Rochioli, Dehlinger, Merry Edwards and Williams-Selyem. "There's immense potential in the Russian River Valley. The best Pinots from here are refined, elegant, stylish and romantic. But there's something beyond the wine. I feel at home here."

The American-educated Jean-Charles (he holds a master's in finance from the University of San Francisco) is enthusiastic about his family's global collection of wineries, but not boastful. "We care deeply about growing grapes and making wine in the most ethical and environmentally responsible way possible," Jean-Charles says.

He is obviously exhilarated by his company's partnership with DeLoach, viewing its acquisition as "the high-quality project we'd been waiting for." The match made between his family firm and DeLoach seems almost predestined. DeLoach, like Boisset, is a French name. (The DeLoach emblem, in fact, is the fleur-de-lis.) "We were both family-owned businesses," Jean-Charles notes. "And beside its Zinfandels, DeLoach has been known for excellent Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays - the Burgundian varieties we have so much experience with."

Michael DeLoach, son of DeLoach Vineyards' founder Cecil DeLoach, recalls that "Boisset found us through a mutual friend in France" who knew that Jean-Charles was enthusiastic about the Russian River Valley. Since the sale, Michael has served as the executive vice president of DeLoach Vineyards, "but really, I'm just the GNL," which stands for "Guy with his Name on the Label," he explains.

DeLoach ended up on the block because of what Michael describes as "a perfect storm" of lousy business conditions in 2003 that forced the California winery into Chapter 11 bankruptcy: There was a wine glut at the time and inventories were stacking up; grape prices were at record lows; a post-September 11 economic downturn lingered; and disposable consumer income was in short supply. Overproduction, however, was the chief culprit. The winery had followed the demand curve of the late 1990s, more than doubling production to 300,000 cases of wine per year between 1995 and 2002. When the bubble burst, that level of production was no longer sustainable and DeLoach had to reorganize in April 2003.

Since its acquisition by Boisset later that year, production has been trimmed to about 120,000 cases with DeLoach's portfolio reduced from 48 separate bottlings to 18, with an emphasis on the Burgundian varieties in three price tiers: OFS ("Our Finest Selection" is one interpretation of the abbreviation) which includes Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel at about \$30; the Russian River Valley line (about \$15) includes these same

varietals, and adds Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and Gewürztraminer; the California grouping, in a \$10 price range, includes Pinot Noir as well as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Zinfandel and DeLoach's popular White Zinfandel. A few vineyard-designated wines will also be produced.

Michael admits that it was tremendously difficult for the DeLoaches to make the changes, but the sadness didn't last long. "When I met Jean-Charles, it was amazing," he recalls. "We were finishing each other's sentences. Our visions were completely parallel." They share a lot of common ground, but are most in sync on the subject of environmentally sound practices. "It's always been our belief at DeLoach that while we are in charge of the land, we should preserve its health for the generations that will come after us," Michael says.

He and Jean-Charles also realize the end product reflects the environment in which it was crafted. "[We] understand that the people [who work for us and with us] are it - they are the reason we do what we do," Jean-Charles says. And they both believe in the value of family-owned businesses. "Families make the difference," he says. "And by family, I mean a family spirit - vineyard manager, winemakers, the whole team that makes up a small business. That keeps things personal. Big corporations have business goals. But our goal is to bring a collection of small boutique wineries that complement each other under the Boisset name."

Since 1992, Boisset has assembled a stellar group of vineyards in the Côte de Nuits section of northern Burgundy that includes portions of Clos du Prieure, Clos de Vougeot, Le Musigny, Les Bonnes Mares, Charmes-Chambertin, Clos des Corvees Pagets and Les Damodes; farther south in the Côte de Beaune the firm owns Corton's Clos du Roi and Les Beaune Grèves, among other parcels. In 1999, in a master-stroke of marketing, Boisset brought these excellent but disparate vineyards together in name as the Domaine de la Vougeraie, creating the first of its several global "Domaines Boisset" (other French collections are located in Chablis, Beaujolais, the Rhône Valley and Languedoc-Roussillon; there is Le Clos Jordanne in Canada; Viña Progreso in Uruguay; Veranda in Chile; and now DeLoach in California).

"These domains are complementary because first, the people at each winery are like family," Jean-Charles says. "Boisset is like a big brother to the team at DeLoach. It's Michael who sets the tone and vision for this winery, and the fact that we share that vision made the winery a perfect match for Boisset." He readily checks off the other prerequisites that make a property such as DeLoach a natural fit: "We are not interested in turning out large quantities of factory wines, but rather in showcasing the terroir of the wines we seek sites around the world where climates are similar and producers who feature Pinot Noir and Chardonnay as their primary products; we prefer boutique-size wineries that take part in our long-term vision for sustainable, organic or biodynamic winemaking that encompass all the steps - from the vineyards through élevage."

DeLoach has been a leader in eco-friendly and socially responsible farming

in the Russian River Valley since 1971. Some of its techniques have included reduced tillage to prevent soil erosion; the use of cover crops instead of chemical fertilizers to improve the soil naturally; and intense canopy management to reduce or eliminate the use of elemental sulfur to control powdery mildew. But now it is taking this approach much further. Virginia Lambrix has signed on as the winery's biodynamic specialist, and is responsible for bringing its 28 estate acres to organic and then biodynamic certification. Jean-Charles says he'll also convey the expanded DeLoach philosophy to the growers who farm the other 450 acres under contract to the winery.

The move toward group-wide interest in biodynamics began internally at Domaine de la Vougeraie. Vineyard manager Bernard Zito and winemaker Pascal Marchand did extensive research in organic and then biodynamic agriculture, becoming convinced of their value, and absorbed the ideas of some of the biodynamic pioneers in French viticulture such as Nicolas Joly of Clos de la Coulée-de-Serrant in the Loire Valley. In 2000, Swan Hamel joined the team at Vougeraie as the biodynamic specialist, making all the method's arcane preparations and working with Zito to assure that the procedures are done in accordance with the biodynamic calendar that relies on the phases of the moon, among other astronomical and astrological considerations.

At DeLoach, Lambrix will be working closely with winemaker Greg La Follette - like the DeLoaches, an American with a French Huguenot heritage - who came aboard as winemaker last year after the departure of Dan Cederquist, who made wine there for eleven vintages. "We were very fortunate to find Greg," Jean-Charles says. "He knows Pinot Noir from this region as well as anyone."

The accomplished La Follette descends from a line of 13 generations of Oklahoma family farmers, but chose to pursue a related but different career. A UC-Davis graduate, he studied, among other things, ancient Burgundian winemaking techniques, and then landed an apprenticeship with the late André Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyard. He has since honed his expertise with Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Zinfandel at properties such as Flowers and Hartford Court.

Walking the DeLoach vineyards, La Follette describes the lay of the land. "Notice the swales aren't planted," he says. "That allows the natural channels for winter rain run-off to function, rather than planting every inch fence to fence. We use fava beans and grains as cover crops to add nutrient to the soil, to create better tillage and as habitat for beneficial insects. We look on weeds as competition for vigorous vines, helping to hold them in check. These dynamics help explain why DeLoach's yields average only 2.7 tons per acre (old vines zinfandel is just 1.5 tons), compared to three to four tons for most producers in the river-influenced soils of the Russian River Valley. Vine training and fertilization are adjusted by the vineyard manager according to the vines' position on the gently rolling hills. In winter, with the leaves dropped and before pruning, it's easy to see how the hilltop vines show less vigorous growth than plants sited lower on the slopes where

topsoil has washed down and collected.

The soils in which the estate vineyards are planted (as well as the hundreds of surrounding acres still privately held by Cecil DeLoach, who will be selling some of the fruit back to DeLoach and also using it to fuel his new Hook & Ladder label), are sandy loams with a heavy clay base. "The original Italian farmers planted here because the clay in the soil holds water and they dry-farmed in the old days," La Follette notes. The clay also forms a hardpan - a dense layer of packed clay that the vine roots generally don't penetrate - that keeps both the vines and the grape berries small, thus promoting concentrated flavors.

At Flowers Vineyard & Winery on Camp Meeting Ridge in the Sonoma Coast appellation, La Follette strove to create a "green winery," as he calls it. "We used one liter of water to make ten liters of wine," he says, "where the industry standard is to use one or two liters of water to make a liter of wine."

How did he accomplish this? "Sanitation was not based on the use of chlorine, but on changing pH. We added a very strong base ("base" meaning the opposite of "acid"), like soda ash to every drop of water we could collect, until we had a solution with a pH of twelve, then we'd sterilize tank and everything in the winery, then rinse, then use a citric acid solution to bring the pH back down to neutral. We used solar and wind power, and night cooling (opening air vents at night to allow cold air in, and shutting them in the morning to keep the cool air in the winery during the day, rather than using air conditioners). We had lights that go off on their own, gravity flow systems that needed no pumps, and compressed nitrogen gas to move wine rather than electric pumps."

He remains a sought-after consultant by boutique producers of Pinot and Chardonnay - though not at Flowers - but most of his time is spent at DeLoach, where he intends to continue his green practices (his first vintage will be the 2004).

Given the winemaking mastery of La Follette, the resources of DeLoach's French parent company, and the environmental sensitivity and commitment to make great wine shared by Jean-Charles Boisset and Michael DeLoach, the estate wines - particularly the Pinot Noir - will no doubt become ever truer to DeLoach's terroir as more of these green and biodynamic programs are put into effect.

The results should be as individual as a person; as unique as the land itself; and as good as any wine in the world - and that goes to the heart of the Boissets' mission.

Sonoma-based Contributing Editor Jeff Cox is the author of *From Vines to Wines and Cellaring Wine*.

tasting BAR

The wines that follow were tasted at DeLoach in January with Jean-Charles Boisset, Michael DeLoach and Greg La Follette. They were not tasted blind. The DeLoach bottlings were made by former winemaker Dan Cederquist.

#### DeLoach Vineyards

DeLoach, 2001 Chardonnay, California - \$10: A pleasant little wine; clean tasting and crisp with some apple notes and just a touch of oak. Score: 87

DeLoach, 2002 Chardonnay, Russian River Valley - \$16: Aromas of oak, apple and pear with distinctly sharp pear flavors on the palate; good structure and definition. Score: 90

DeLoach, 2003 OFS Chardonnay, Russian River Valley - \$25: A big, barrel-fermented Chardonnay with lots of oak, lemony fruit and some yeasty autolysis notes. Score: 89

DeLoach, 2001 Estate Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley - \$18: Thin compared to more recent vintages like 2002, but showing a bright strawberry nose and cherry flavors with a clean, food-friendly profile. Score: 88

DeLoach, 2002 Estate Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley - \$18: Aromas of strawberry-rhubarb pie and wildflowers. Strawberry, red cherry and raspberry on the palate with vanillin oak flavors complemented by sturdy structure, hunger-inducing acidity and very fine tannins -all wrapped up in a satiny package. Score: 89

DeLoach, 2002 OFS Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley - \$29: A classic Pinot Noir of refined elegance. Silky in the mouth with black fruit flavors of blueberry, plum and brambleberry, and a lingering finish with subtle vanilla overtones. Great quality, especially for the price. Score: 93

#### Boisset Sampler

Bouchard Aîné & Fils, 2003 Pouilly-Fuissé - \$25: Pretty green-gold color. Sweet aromas of jasmine, elder flowers and honey. Round and full in the mouth with good minerality overlain with a light apple fruitiness. Score: 90

J. Moreau & Fils, 2001 Premier Cru Vaillon, Chablis - \$32: Toasty nose of popcorn and marshmallows. Fat for a Chablis with flavors of grapefruit and lemon that echo on a crisply acidic finish. Score: 88

Vougeot Le Clos, 2001 Blanc de Vougeot, Premier Cru - \$115: (This rare white Burgundy has been produced for 900 years from a triangular vineyard near Clos de Vougeot.) The bouquet and palate fuse mineral, dried fruit and nutty flavors in a holy association. The vineyard's neighbors are Clos de Vougeot, Musigny and Les Amoureuses. As great a white wine as you'll find - outstanding, astounding, exceptional and worth the price. Score: 98

Bouchard Aîné & Fils 2001 Gevrey-Chambertin - \$40: Pretty pinot notes

hide behind bretty aromas. Racy flavors of pie cherries, red licorice and red fruit with strong acid structure. Score: 87

Bouchard Aîné & Fils, 2002 Monthelie La Meix Bataille, Premier Cru Cuvée Signature - \$33: This Pinot Noir is lush with a full-bodied mouth-feel, a nose of strawberry and raspberry and pure pinot flavors of cherry and strawberry with a hint of lavender. Score: 89

Vougeot Les Cras, 2001 Premier Cru - \$80: (The small vineyard abuts the Grand Cru Clos de Vougeot.) Strawberry and violet scents with rich, harmonious flavors of sweet cherry, Italian plum and fresh nectarine. The finish lasts and lasts. Score: 93 - JC