

Jean-Charles
Boisset

the french Paradox

Jean-Charles Boisset is spearheading the new generation at the helm of the family company, a dynamic prototype for the French wine industry – but one still preoccupied with *terroir*.

Richard Woodard met him

Lack of activity should never be mistaken for lack of opportunity. It's easy to think that the French wine industry is in terminal decline simply because of the sloth and indolence that has greeted the rise and rise of the New World over the past 20 years.

But, in an era of branding and mass communication, France has names which resound way beyond such ephemera as Hardys and Blossom Hill: Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne – consumer recall that Gallo and Constellation can only dream of. All that's needed is the wit and dynamism to turn those brands into 'meaningful consumer propositions'. In other words, to make good products, market them and sell them at the right price.

If you were looking for a prototype French wine producer to kick-start this process, Boisset would be a strong candidate. Already the veteran of a host of acquisitions and dynamic joint ventures with Vincor in Canada and Bibendum in the UK, the company has grown by a factor of six in the past ten years. International in focus, fiercely ambitious, not frightened of scary new ideas like screwcaps and varietal labelling. Modern, in other words.

In fact, the company was only created in 1961 – making it no more than a snotty-nosed teenager in French wine terms – while Jean-Charles Boisset, vice-president and spearhead of the second generation, was born eight years later. He's spent almost as much of his life in the US as in France and includes marketing studies on an impressively international CV.

So it comes as some surprise, when we meet, to hear him using the t-word with the free and easy air of a dyed-in-the-wool Bordelais. Indeed, his first words to me (after an enthusiastically matey greeting which betrays its transatlantic influence) are to the effect that growth is important, but so is 'being very true to our *terroir*'.

Terroir. The New World is desperately trying to acquire

it, while the Old World is enslaved by it. I wasn't expecting this ex-UCLA man to spout the mantra of Old France with quite such abandon, but he's far from bashful about mentioning it, even in connection with such new-fangled ideas as consumption trends and market acceptance.

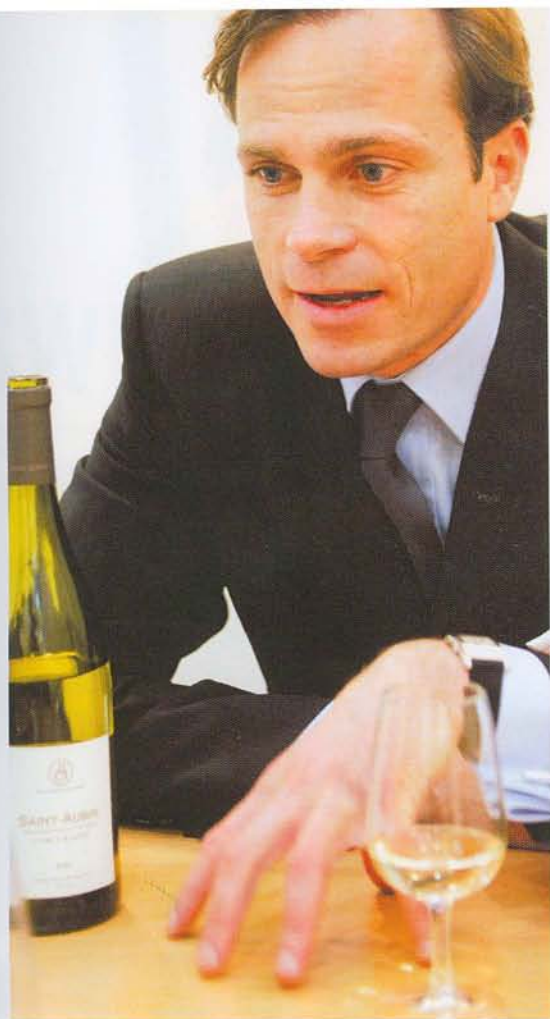
There's a paradox inherent in the story of Boisset. Less than 50 years old, the company boasts some of the most historic names in Burgundy: Faiveley, Bouchard Aîné et Fils, Jaffelin. Boisset reels off the dates of their foundation as if they were battles fought and won, but is blunt about their usefulness to the Boisset corporate vision: 'Each of those wineries had a critical history in their regions. We believe that was essential to help us become what we want.'

Mention the company's international activities, and the t-word rears its head again. 'We look around the world for producers of Pinot Noir, but what we really want is a true expression of *terroir*,' says Boisset.

But then Boisset has its roots in some of the most restrictive *terroir* in the world: Burgundy. As such, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay have formed the basis of the company's activities elsewhere, including the high-profile purchase of DeLoach in California in 2003. 'I'd been looking for a Pinot Noir producer for five years,' admits Boisset. 'We believe that Russian River is closest to high-quality *terroir* for Pinot Noir. Everything was there. To us it was better than Carneros.'

The *terroir* may have been impressive, but the numbers weren't. De Loach was practically bust, having filed for Chapter 11 protection – so what went wrong?

Boisset's marketing expertise leads him to approach the question from another angle, firstly accentuating the positive and praising the family ethos, premium focus and relatively small size at 125,000 cases. 'Then they tried to go to 250,000 cases and it was too much. They went for 48 different wines – and we went to 16,' he says. Style, too, was a draw, with Boisset describing the wines as 'delicate, not so masculine and hairy-chested'.



Acquisitions like DeLoach, the various Burgundian ventures and partnerships with the likes of Vincor and Corpora in Chile have created a 'family of wines' (Boisset's words), with some common traits running through them. Like what, I ask? 'Older vines, no pesticides, green harvest, sorting table, open wooden vats. Long maceration, long pressing. Gravity flow, light fining if necessary with egg whites. Filtration if necessary, bottling in the cellar.' His rapid, machine-gun delivery makes it a bit like a stop-motion film showing the life cycle of a wine. He talks of each wine having its own 'mission', 'whether it is £6 (\$11) or £200 (\$364)'.

Now this delineation of 'permitted' practices sounds a little more Old World, dictatorial, prescriptive. Not a bit of it, says Boisset. 'What's the point of going to a region and doing a me-too thing?' he asks. 'We don't want to replicate Burgundy in Chile or California. You respect the country you go to.' So Zin is made in California, and Carmenère in Chile. And here's another paradox: in showing what some would say was a very un-French respect for the ways of others rather than imposing his will from outside, Boisset is arguably being true to each individual *terroir* – a very French notion.

So what of France itself? If we're considering Boisset as some kind of template for future growth and dynamism in France, what does Jean-Charles himself think of the state of its beleaguered wine industry?

Regulations first. While in favour of modernisation, he is reluctant to see rule changes as a panacea. 'I think having more flexibility in France is essential to better evolve in the world of wine. However, one cannot always take refuge in regulations to find an excuse. The moment that producers stop being in the marketplace all the time, I think that's the moment they change the culture and become complacent.'

What is more, he's perfectly aware that this applies just as much to a company like Boisset as it does to the lowliest

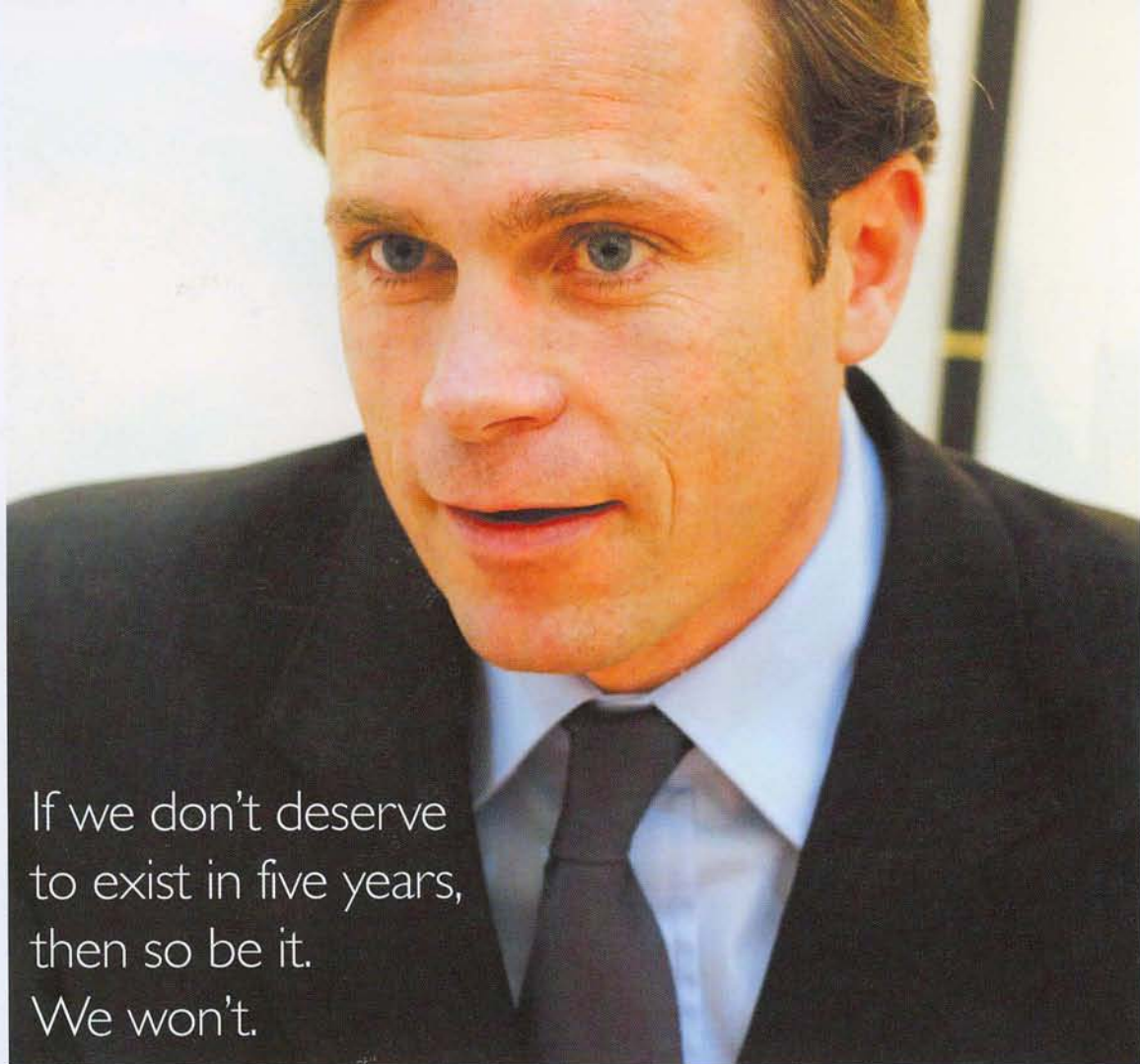


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and most militant Languedoc *vigneron*. 'Wine is supply and demand, but it's also a natural selection of what is the best,' he says. 'If we don't deserve to exist in five years, then so be it. We won't.'

And he is scornful – even more so, perhaps through proximity, than most New World-ers – of the 'hand-out' culture still endemic in France. 'I'm furious when I see people on strike,' he says – and you believe him – 'I say: "Guys, why don't you go to Sainsbury's and pour your wine? Why

say mama, mama, help me? Go and sell your wine. Instead of huge Grenache, move into Merlot and Chardonnay!"'

Until finally he returns inward, to examine his family company and burgeoning inheritance once again: 'We have evolved dramatically as a company in the last eight years. If we had not done that, would we still be around? I question that.'

And with that parting shot, the parallels with the French wine industry as a whole could not be clearer. ■

Jean-Charles Boisset on...

Growth: 'Everyone talks about triple-digit growth. Great. But we are not in a hurry. With a beautiful girl, at first you want it all to happen in five minutes, but you have to take your time.'

Regulations: 'We need to evolve in regulations, but the better the wine you make, the easier it is to sell.'

Future deals: 'Acquisitions may be down the road, but we are really having fun with the companies we are working with.'

Consumer education: 'It would be very pretentious for us to say we're here to educate the consumers. We're here to take the consumer to the next level when they have the basic knowledge.'

The New World: 'What we call the New World is more state of mind than a region. Chile has been producing wine for nearly 200 years.'

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Jean-Charles Boisset.

Occupation: Vice-president, Boisset La Famille des Grands Vins.

Born: 4 September, 1969.

Education:

- Lycée Française, Washington DC.
- Bachelor of Arts, University of London.
- Investment degree, London Business School.
- Graduate studies at UCLA.
- Master's in economics and finance, University of San Francisco.

Career:

1994: Joins Boisset America to create a US operation to import and acquire domestic California wineries (Joliesse Vineyards, Lyeth Estate, DeLoach Vineyards, Seven Peaks). Develops the concept of 'viniculture' in France.

1997: Creates Le Domaine de la Vougeraie with his sister, Nathalie.

2003: Privatizes the family company as part of a family decision to assert independence and long-term vision. Develops international Pinot Noir portfolio to focus on super-premium Pinot Noir in three continents and five countries.