

The French Rabbit Strike Again- TH Interviews Jean Charles Boisset about the wine industry

by Bonnie Hulkower on 06.13.08



TH did a story about the [French Rabbit](#) a few years ago, and now Jean Charles is back preaching his innovative wine packaging to oenophiles and the masses. He is fully aware that some people in the wine industry may think he is an extraterrestrial. Even some previous TH readers said "I'll pass and stick with glass". But, certainly not Tom who is opening a wine bar in New York City.



Treehugger(TH): What got you started in the whole organic, sustainable movement?

Jean Charles Boisset (JCB): My grandparents were great teachers who believed in the lunar cycles, in a sense of space and movement, as I do. Which is why [biodynamic](#) fits so well with me. 507 is not a pair of jeans! All of my vineyards are eco-certified organic. Some are fully biodynamic, others are moving that way. My vineyards were certified by the late 1990's. I really pushed that part of the movement.

TH: Isn't it challenging financially to go green?

JCB: It is always challenging when you want to do something differently. Farming organically/biodynamically was initially a big constraint, but then it just inspired me to take things to the next level—to think about my whole production cycle. I now think about everything—my soap, my electricity consumption. I changed the voltage in my cellars, I believe electricity affects wine. I spent more than \$3 million on water treatment. I started to think about organic inks on the label, and organic glues, recycled cartons, lighter glass, less cork. In our offices, we have water fountains, but paper cups are interdit!

TH: What made you focus on the low end of the market? It seems to me most vintners try to focus on the high end.

JCB: Typically 7 out of 10 wine bottles cost less than \$12. Most wines are drunk within 30 minutes of purchase. For these less expensive wines, the cost of packaging is the "bulk" of the cost. We need to change this practice. We need to do it to protect the climate, but we also need to do it to add value for the customer/retailer. Convenience, ecology, and value are a trifecta. Americans shouldn't complain, in France, gas is \$8/gallon.

TH: In the past you pushed the "French rabbit," a milk carton like "tetrapack" packaging with "ears". What's up your sleeve now?

JCB: The French rabbit allowed us to save 24 trips to the winery for trucks delivering glass bottles, that's a lot of carbon saved. You can also put 2x as much wine in the French rabbit, I wish I had invented the tetrapack! One of the pluses of the tetrapak is you can hide your alcohol consumption from nosy neighbors. In France, you are charged by the amount of garbage you have, which is an incentive to create less waste. There are 175 "green policemen" who check if people, especially restaurants are recycling.

My next release is an aluminum container for wine. It is great especially for Beaujolais. Many people drink it at room temperature, but it is lovely to drink it slightly chilled, it is charming. These aluminum containers have a Blue Dot technology that changes to blue when the wine is chilled. That way you know when the wine is ready to drink. It could take 30 minutes or more to cool a glass bottle of wine, with the aluminum it only takes 10 minutes. This is launching in NYC in the next few weeks. It has already launched on the West coast. Another benefit is you can't break it.

TH: It still seems odd to me to drink wine out of a carton or aluminum, how is it received?

JCB: I like that I am bringing in people who may not normally drink wine. Some people who picnic or camp are now telling me how easy and enjoyable it is to bring wine on these outings. I believe that education leads to excitement, which leads to refinement. My 17 year-old nephew wanted to go to a party in France, and he asked if he could take the aluminum bottles of wine to impress the girls. It is a novelty item. It invokes excitement.

TH: How do you avoid the wine having a metallic taste?

JCB: We conducted many, many tests. We coat the aluminum with epoxy, like the vats used for fermentation. With the epoxy you can't taste it. The nature of the wine business is not innovation. 3500 years ago they drank wine out of goat skin. In Greek times, they drank out of amphoras. Then in Roman times they drank out of wood. It is crazy to me that people have been drinking wine out of the glass, which is an industry that hasn't seen innovation since the Italian Renaissance. We need to change for the environment and for practicality. I come from Dijon, France, where the mustard container has evolved—so must the wine container. We need different containers to suit different wines and needs. Nice corks are appropriate for nice wines.

TH: So are you trying to democratize drinking wine? Do you drink cheap wine?

JCB: I don't just drink expensive wine. Well, (laughs) I rarely drink wine below \$8 a bottle. But still, to love wine, you must be open to drinking all kinds of wine. With all these efforts, I want to create a shift in the wine world, first, to organic/biodynamic, and then to more sustainable packaging. I'm not sure what the third phase will be.

TH: Perhaps it will be adapting to the climate change we have already created and adjusting our wine growing regions and seasons.

JCB: Yes, perhaps. In 2003, they harvested in August! I believe in listening to nature. I'm against an 8-5 schedule. I'm against heavy equipment that kills the roots of the vines. My vineyards in Burgundy were planted 11 centuries ago. I have a responsibility to the past, to not go for a quick fix. Yes, what I am doing with packaging is ballsy; French wines are based on tradition. I'm used to getting rejected. But good things take time.

TH: Like wine?

JCB: Yes, like wine.