

# DR.

RANDALL  
GRAHM

THE MUTINEER INTERVIEW  
BY ALAN KRÖPF

# DOON



www.love.com





**Mutineer Magazine** is all about seeking out the inspiration in fine beverage, and Randall Graham's Bonny Doon Vineyard is inspiration stuffed with creativity and wrapped in psychedelic visions of zeppelins hovering over vineyards with mysterious intentions. Graham has a reputation for being outspoken, which is a refreshing personality trait in an industry that subscribes to public relations filters and politically correct "safe answers". Graham shoots from the hip, with controversial and contradicting answers held together by unscripted honesty that is brought to life by everything he's contributed to wine culture thus far in his career.

We're proud to present this edition of the Mutineer Interview with the legendary Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyard.

**RANDALL GRAHAM:** It's interesting, because I got my start not far from where you got your start, like eight blocks, nine long blocks from the Beverly Hills Hotel, Santa Monica and Roxbury, at the age of twenty...two. And I was drinking '64 Cheval Blanc four times a week. I've drunk '64 Cheval Blanc probably 35 times, maybe 40 times...maybe 50 times, I don't know. In its prime. This was my entry into wine. That wine is so good. That wine is soooooo good. We were given these incredible opportunities that normal people don't have.

**MUTINEER MAGAZINE:** How did you have access to that wine?

RG: Working in the wine store. They opened it every night. These were the days when '70s Bordeaux sold for five dollars. Twenty bucks for the '70 Latour. [Chateau] Palmer, sixteen bucks. I bought a magnum of '61 Petrus, which I had to return because I couldn't afford it...I should've somehow found a way to keep that. But those were crazy, crazy days.

MM: How long did you work in the wine store?

RG: A year.

MM: And then?

RG: I went back to school, I went to [University of California] Davis. My palate was informed by French wine primarily.

MM: Any regions that you're particularly fascinated with right now?

RG: I like Umbria. I love Piedmonte. Friuli is really cool. Weird grapes. Any

place that makes unusual things, I really like. I think Austria's really cool. And Burgundy. I wish I could afford to buy Burgundies. I think we're so fortunate to be living the renaissance of Burgundy. It's amazing. The renaissance of the Rhone. And, you know, you see the northern Rhones quite tempted to make their wines more fatter, more sexy, more Parker friendly. It's hard to stay focused on looking in if there's such a temptation with the rewards so great, like pleasing, giving the world what it wants. It's very hard to turn your back on it. It's very hard to do that.

MM: Do you think you've fallen into that trap?

RG: Um, a little bit. I'm not greedy for money, but I want to do the things that work. I wanted my business to succeed. I wanted critics to like the wines, I want people to like the wines. I want them to buy it. So if there was a new designer yeast that could give your wine a little more body and texture and intensity, aromatics, you know, sure, all for it.

MM: Have you ever had a California wine that rocked your world?

RG: Nope. Which, in fairness, I don't try a lot of California wines, but I'm told that they're actually out there, and I can never remember which ones they are. I have some wines that impressed me. The Rhys pinot noirs, Rhys, from the Santa Cruz Mountains, I think were very impressive, very impressed with, but, they didn't rock my world.

MM: What do you want millennials to know about your wine?

RG: A lot. One, wine is alive. Wine has an intelligence. Wine changes. Wine needs time to develop and you need time to understand it. Don't make the judgment in a second. Don't think you understand the wine in a second. Be patient. Spend time. Invest time. The average person doesn't grasp the distinction, doesn't understand that there are wines that are made through industrial process, that are very dependable, very standardized. You're not going to have this variation from year to year, but they're confections, and then there are other wines that are more artisanal, maybe they're flawed, but there's something more authentic and real about them...honest.

MM: Your early obsession with pinot noir in Santa Cruz is well documented. Talk about the pursuit of that obsession and the experience of it not working out.

"I didn't grasp how complex the problem was. I thought I had a handle on it. I had no concept, no clue at how profoundly difficult the problem was..."



Graham in the original Bonny Doon Vineyard in the early 1980s.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BONNY DOON VINEYARDS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN ANDREAE



Randall Grahm surrounded by his creations in the Bonny Doon tasting room & restaurant in Santa Cruz.



RG: I was young. I didn't understand...I didn't know what I didn't know. I didn't grasp how complex the problem was. I thought I had a handle on it. I had no concept, no clue at how profoundly difficult the problem was, so I just blindly tried to do it, and made a couple of mistakes and sort of gave up. I mean, basically, I gave up because the Rhone varieties seemed so much more promising and more appropriate. It beat me, and I just said, "You know what? I'll retreat. I'll fight another day. I'll do it later."

MM: Was that hard to accept?

RG: At the time, I think it was a little hard, but the Rhone thing was kind of exciting. I was starting to get mentioned and I guess I was a little intoxicated by the recognition I was getting. There was an article in *Wine Spectator*, which in those days was a big deal. And then I was on the cover of *Wine Spectator*, which was silly. Silliness.

MM: What's the difference between starting a winery when you did versus starting a winery today?

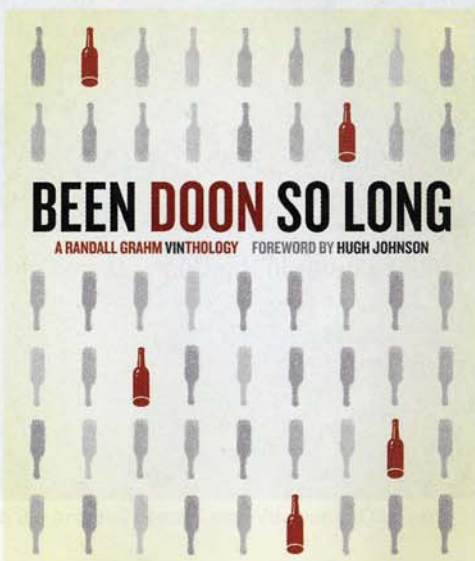
RG: Well superficially, it was way easier back then, way easier. The world was more forgiving. There was also more of a multiplicity of styles; things hadn't sort of gelled like there is one correct way of making wine. It's like, "okay, if you make wine this way, you get a 91, if you make it this way, you get a 93, if you just change this thing a little bit." It wasn't business. You did it because you wanted to do it. You liked making wine.

MM: Given your past success, did you ever think you'd feel the way you feel now in terms of needing to sell the wine you need to sell?

RG: Never. This is new territory. I haven't felt this way since I started. Granted, a lot of this is a function of the ridiculous economy. Nevertheless, it's really weird and scary. I mean, I think a good business plan is to make really good wines, sell at a fair price, put an interesting label, have good story. You'd think that's a reasonable plan. That's the beginning of a plan. Now you gotta figure



The infamous leopard from *The Vinferno*, "A Giant Southern Leopard known to be fierce, Stood right before me and gave out a fearsome snarl, More disquieting than a sudden outbreak of *la maladie de Pierce*." The *Vinferno* and more is compiled in Graham's new book, "Been Doon So Long".



out what's the third derivative of that plan, you have to be like a Jedi or something, a mystical connection, I don't know... I would hate to be starting a wine business right now, but actually I am sort of starting a wine business. It really feels very much like a startup. It's weird that that's how it feels.

MM: Do you regret the moves you've made in the last couple of years, downsizing the company?

RG: No.

MM: Had you not made those moves, would things be as difficult?

RG: I'd be out of business I'm sure by now. I'm sure if I hadn't it would've been a major business disaster, major catastrophe. Everybody's really hurting. The reason I sold it, one of the reasons, is it just got so big. We couldn't compete. I didn't like the wines. They meant nothing. I mean, it was kind of cool to be the 28th largest winery in the United States. That was cool, but so what. You know?

MM: What was it like to work with Ralph Steadman on some of your wine labels?

RG: It was fun. He's a nut. Difficult. Great guy. Completely from another planet. Very temperamental. Volatile. He does not take direction at all. Argumentative. Brilliant, I mean, watching him work was, you know, he draws really fast, really fast. He puts it together, a drawing, in a shocking amount of time. It's like automatic, like a machine... amazing. He does not take any criticism, will not take any criticism, like none. Zero.

MM: If you could choose one Bonny Doon wine for our readers to try, and that wine develops the magical ability to talk on the shelf, what does that wine say to the prospective buyer?

RG: It could be a couple. If it were the albarino, it would say something like, "This wine is acoustic dude. It's not embellished, it's not baroque, it's not messed with. It's very plain, un-amplified. It's simple, it's honest. Check it out. It's as eloquent in what it doesn't do as with what it does do. Check it out with some ceviche or some scallops or some shrimp." Or the Central Coast Syrah, the wine that Parker gave a 78. Get some ribs, with some tomato sauce or whatever. Get something savory, and try it. There is a savoriness in the wine that links with savory food. Something that's been cooked, roasted over a period of time.





PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN ANDREAE



MM: If you could travel back in time to when you started your journey towards becoming a winemaker, what advice would you give yourself?

RG: Learn how to farm, learn how to grow grapes. Everything else is trivial; just learn how to grow good grapes. Spend time in Europe, when you can, before you have a family, before you're stuck. Don't go to [University of California] Davis, go to Torino or Montpellier. Get a different perspective, because, the other thing is that, in California, in the New World, we're so much in the culture of control. We want to control everything, we want to control our irrigation, we want to control our yeast, fermentation rates. We want to control our tannins, we want to take the bad tannins out and put the good tannins in, and I think it's just sort of the wrong approach. You lose something very precious when you control everything, the wine can't suddenly evolve and change in unexpected ways, you already know where you are taking it, and I think you lose a lot of possibility of greatness, and I think also that you lose a lot of complexity.

MM: What is the vision of this new vineyard you're pursuing?

RG: I'm trying to create conditions for something very interesting to happen. For the site to express itself and it's just a matter of intention. For example, I'm intending to dry farm. I don't know whether I will or whether I'll succeed, I've had people come in and say it cannot be done, will not work.

MM: Do you have a time line for the project?

RG: I want to do it before I die. That's my time line.

MM: I was showing your book [Been Doon So Long] to some friends, and the illustrations and concepts are pretty amazing, especially the leopard in the Vinferno.

RG: You know it's freaky. The freaky thing about this new vineyard that we're gonna plant in San Juan Batista is that I had dreamt about it before I saw it, and then I saw it, and that was the vineyard in my mind when I was writing the Vinferno about the pinot noir vineyard. But then the other thing that was weird, this is so weird, this is SO weird, I had forgotten that in the poem, there was a leopard, but there was also a lion. First I see the leopard, then I see the lion.

Turns out, there actually is a lion in the vineyard, more or less that I saw,

more or less recently in the same place as I envisioned this pinot noir vineyard. There actually is a lion.

MM: Like, an animal?

RG: Ya.

MM: In Santa Cruz?

RG: In San Juan Batista. On our property, there's a lion that more or less lives on the property.

MM: How is that possible?

RG: He's a lion. He can do whatever he wants.

MM: A wild animal lion is roaming around your vineyard property in California?

RG: Well it's not a vineyard yet. And there is a lion who I've seen once, my colleague Philippe has seen three times, once at a range of thirty feet, and scared the fuck out of him. He was being hunted. The lion was hunting him.

MM: Have you guys done anything about this lion?

RG: Not yet. But soon. It's on the list.

MM: Your to do list?

RG: It's on the list, ya. I don't know whether it's a male or female, or if there's more than one, but there is a lion.

MM: Well if lions don't eat grapes it'll keep the deer out.

RG: It does keep the deer out. They don't eat grapes. My plan is to get a big, serious dog...a really serious dog. That's my plan...and maybe some spray...or something. I mean, not that it will...I won't even see it coming when it comes, but, nevertheless, it'll be good to have a little psychological something...

MM: To protect you against the lion?

RG: And a fence, you know, a fence is a complete joke. They can jump crazy high...crazy high. So, we'll see how it goes. And maybe when we clear all the stuff and plant the vines, it won't be an issue. I'll feel better with a fence, even if it's a joke for the lion...[laughs]

"Don't think you understand the wine in a second. Be patient. Spend time. Invest time."



PHOTO COURTESY OF BONNY DOON VINEYARDS

Graham in the original Bonny Doon Vineyard in the early 1980s.