



# tidings

VIRTUAL WINERIES EXPLAINED | OUTSIDE CHÂTEAUNEUF

## PIECES OF

SEE PAGE 34

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW  
WITH THE ORIGINAL RHÔNE  
RANGER RANDALL GRAHM

150 WINES  
SCORED



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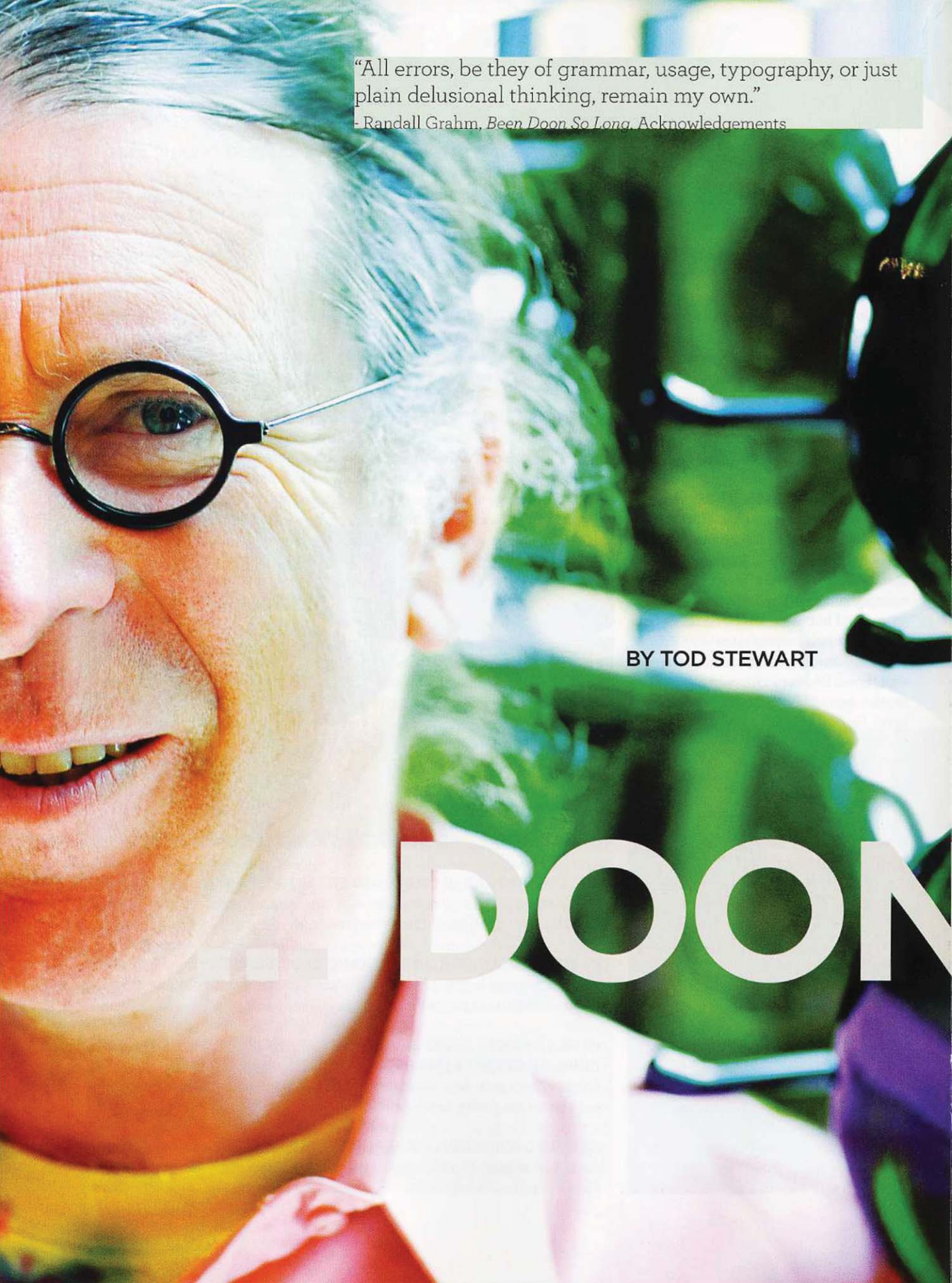
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"All errors, be they of grammar, usage, typography, or just plain delusional thinking, remain my own."

- Randall Grahm, *Been Doon So Long*, Acknowledgements

BY TOD STEWART

# DOON



Some make wine. Some write about wine. A few do both. Yet it's unlikely that any do both as well as Bonny Doon Vineyard's Randall Grahm. Known as "THE RHÔNE RANGER" due to his propensity for planting Rhône varietals in California (as well as other "ugly ducklings" — non-Cabernet and low Parker-score species), he is, in my humble opinion, the best wine writer currently dipping a quill. His manuscript, *Been Doon So Long: A Randall Grahm Vinthology*, recently won the James Beard Foundation Award for best wine tome of 2010. I would hate him, but he seems like such a *nice* boy.

Grahm, an accomplished and prompt emailer, provided *Tidings* with his first Canadian (possibly first, period — take that, *Spectator*!) interview since this win. That it was done via email reinforced a few things; first, that Grahm is woefully unprepared to give a "phoner" (yeah, I know) due to the fact that flitting through pages of a thesaurus is difficult to do when chatting, and that second, my editor is still using the "times are tough in publishing" ruse to deny me a trip to California. Sad, really.

**TIDINGS:** SO I HAVE TO START WITH THE USUAL, WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO WIN BLAHBLAHBLAH?

**Grahm:** It was of course wonderfully cool to win the Beard award for the book, despite the fact that it has likely set my spiritual development back at least a few lifetimes or so. But more to the point, as great as it is for book sales (now into second printing) and for general brand awareness (that certainly couldn't hurt), at the end of the day, the book is just a collection of words. What will ultimately be of more significance is whether I can turn those words into deeds.

**T:** YOU MAINTAIN IN THE BOOK (AND ELSEWHERE) THAT YOU ABANDON YOUR "RAGING OBSESSION WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATING A GREAT PINOT NOIR IN THE SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS," BECAUSE YOU DISCOVERED THAT RHÔNE VARIETIES WERE MUCH BETTER SUITED TO THOSE ENVIRONS. RUMOUR HAS IT (OR AT LEAST THE ONE I'M ABOUT TO START) THAT JIM CLENDENEN<sup>1</sup> SO THOROUGHLY ROUTED YOU ON THIS THAT YOUR ENVY, HUMILIATION AND BORDERLINE PERSONALITY CAUSED YOU TO ABANDON YOUR INITIAL DREAMS. SO WHAT'S THE SCOOP?

**G:** Well, I'm not sure if Pinot dreams ever die. (I just planted a half-acre of it in San Juan Bautista.) N.B., I planted that amount rather than say 30 acres, because I am sincerely interested in producing an original wine rather than a La Tâche wannabe, and my suspicion is that my half-acre will likely add little to the ecological richness of the Pinotwelt. (And the oddball Grenache/Rhône variety experiment that I'm still formulating might indeed turn out to be amazing.) I love Jim and enormously respect what he does, but don't feel that I compete with him or anyone. (I may envy them their success, but I don't compete.) It's kind of a solo man against himself quest for me, kind of like something you might find in a made-for-TV-movie starring David Carradine.

<sup>1</sup> JIM CLENDENEN IS THE MIND BEHIND AU BON CLIMAT WINERY IN SANTA BARBARA, WHICH IS CLOSE ENOUGH TO SANTA CRUZ TO GIVE GRAHM THE HEEBIES



T: YOU HAVE SAID SOME RATHER, UM, PROVOCATIVE THINGS ABOUT OTHER WINE-MAKERS, WINE WRITERS AND BIG-CHAIN LIQUOR RETAILERS. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN SUED BY, I DUNNO, JAMES LAUBEOTOMY, BOBBY PORKER OR EVEN CLENDONEN?

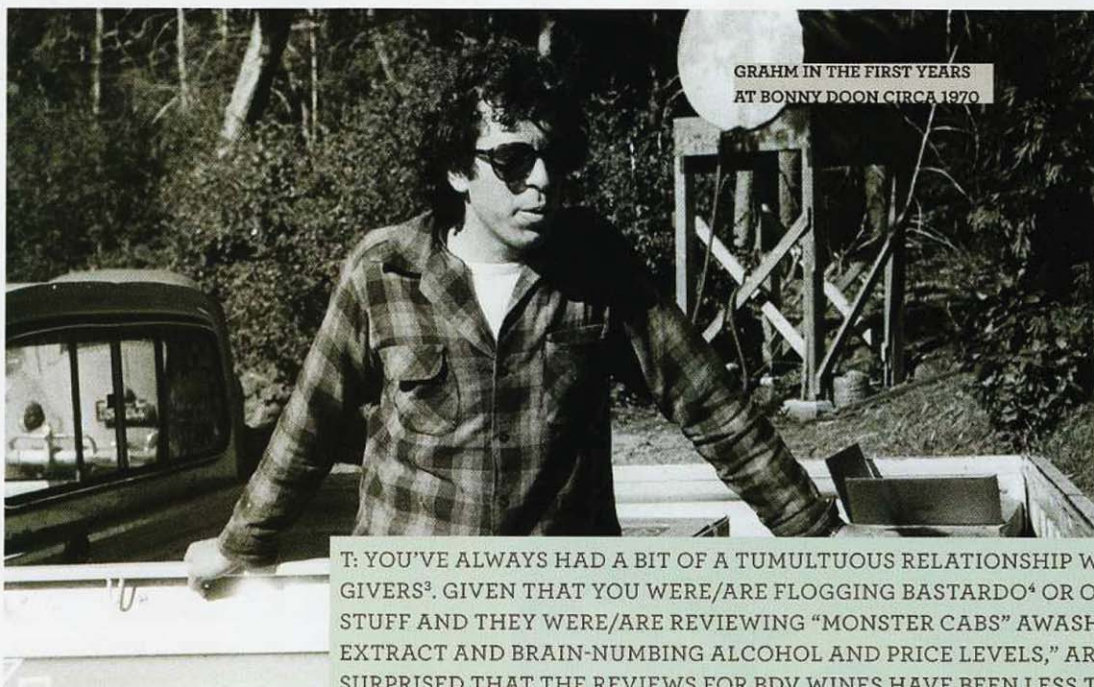
G: I don't think that my, "I'd rather have a frontal lobotomy than a Laube in front of me," comment was libellous, just ill considered. The only significant lawsuit was from Chuck Wagner, and it is really something I'd prefer to not talk about at this time.

T: DO YOU HAVE A LAWYER ON RETAINER? IF NOT, WHY?

G: I'm trying to reel it in a little bit and not be quite so provocative, at least for provocation's sake.

T: WHAT IS WRONG WITH CLOS DU BOIS<sup>2</sup> ANYWAY?

G: Nothing apart from the fact that there's no clos, and no bois (at least that I know of), apart from the wood barrels/chips(?) the wines are subjected to. CdB was rather a bit of a straw-man that I used in the story to indicate that the spouse of the (mostly) fictional character had somewhat parochial taste in wine.



T: YOU'VE ALWAYS HAD A BIT OF A TUMULTUOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SCORE-GIVERS<sup>3</sup>. GIVEN THAT YOU WERE/ARE FLOGGING BASTARDO<sup>4</sup> OR OTHER WEIRD-ASS STUFF AND THEY WERE/ARE REVIEWING "MONSTER CABS" AWASH IN "GOBS OF EXTRACT AND BRAIN-NUMBING ALCOHOL AND PRICE LEVELS," ARE YOU ACTUALLY SURPRISED THAT THE REVIEWS FOR BDV WINES HAVE BEEN LESS THAN 90+?<sup>5</sup>

G: I actually have worked with the Bastardo grape. Strange, but not bad. But to answer your question: Not so surprised upon reflection; I don't expect the wine critics' "Boy's Club" to be particularly sympathetic to this member of the "Anti-Flavour Elite." But I tend to be fairly naïve/clueless about many things. I keep waiting for the absolute killer review on the most recent vintage of Cigare Volant. And going out of my way to be personally offensive has not terribly helped my cause.

T: OF THE 36 MILLION GRAPE TYPES YOU'VE PLANTED/GROWN/KILLED/SENT RUNNING BACK TO PORTUGAL, WHICH IS CONSISTENTLY YOUR FAVOURITE AND, WAIT FOR IT, WHY?

G: Y'know, maybe this is not so odd, but I'm not sure that I really have a real favourite. I honestly don't think that for most of the areas where grapes are grown in California, a mono-cépage really works. (California's very best Syrah pales in comparison with almost any Cornas.) We can do impressive in California, rather difficult to do distinctive, at least with a single varietal. But I'll reserve final judgment till the Sagrantino that I hope to plant bears fruit.

2) A CALIFORNIA WINERY THAT IS MORE COMMERCIAL SUCCESSFUL THAN BONNY DOON; SEE "A PERFECT DAY FOR BARBERFISH," *BEEN DOON* SO LONG P.99

3) *IBID.* PP. 97 - 99

4) A SOMEWHAT OBSCURE GRAPE OF PORTUGUESE ORIGIN (MAYBE)

5) YOU CAN TYPICALLY FIND PLENTY OF BONNY DOON WINES AROUND LONG AFTER ALL THE CAYMUS "SPECIAL SELECTION" IS SOLD OUT



**T:** SPEAKING OF SYRAH, YOURS COME ACROSS AS A TAD MORE RESTRAINED AND, DARE I SAY, NOTICEABLY MORE FRENCH THAN MANY OF THE OTHERS I'VE TRIED FROM CALIFORNIA. WHAT'S WITH ALL THE ALCOHOL IN THOSE OTHERS ANYWAY? I MEAN, 16 PER CENT? THAT'S WHACKED!

**G:** As far as my colleagues making high octane Syrah, they are afflicted with a weird mutant brain virus, but high scores being awarded these wines are results of a complementary brain virus of some wine critics.

**T:** ORGANIC/BIODYNAMIC — HAVE YOU/WILL YOU CONSIDER EITHER?

**G:** We have farmed our (now former) vineyard biodynamically and have encouraged all of our contract growers to do the same. We continue to make biodynamic compost for most of them and to spray the biodynamic preps for their somewhat dubious selves. I think that biodynamic farming is a superb route to the discovery of terroir, but in and of itself will not guarantee brilliant grapes. You still need to have planted the right grapes in the right place and be a good farmer.

**T:** WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WINE WORLD? OKAY, I'LL MAKE IT EASIER, THE CALIFORNIA WINE WORLD, RIGHT NOW?

**G:** Perfect storm of just too much competition from all quarters. Why has every plastic surgeon, race car driver, rock star, investment banker, not to mention every farmer of apples, pears or lettuce, decided that they all need enter the wine business at this precise moment? And every Eastern European/South American/soon Asian country that should be happy growing potatoes, pineapples or goji berries now wants to grow vinifera grapes? There has also been an extreme contraction/consolidation in the channels of distribution, which makes it very difficult for wineries producing below a certain volume level to be particularly interesting to wholesalers, not that the margins we're receiving after all of the discounting is done is particularly attractive. Philosophically, I don't think that competition is a bad thing, just tough on the tender shoots of the weirdo/oddball grapes/less common wine styles, that require perhaps a longer time to become known, appreciated, and (tears coming to my eyes now) loved. What I am really unhappy about is the fact that the wine business has grown up, matured and has lost its innocence — one that it still possessed when I first entered the business. It seems that for almost everyone in the business it is now almost entirely about the business itself. There is just such an enormous self-consciousness now about everything that one does — and it's crippling creativity and originality. What will Parker think? What will the *Spectator* think? In the old days, the geezers would say, "I don't care if nobody likes my wine. &\*&#@ 'em. I'll drink it myself." Nobody says that anymore. It's too expensive to drink oneself.

**T:** HOW CAN IT BE FIXED?

**G:** Don't know that it can be fixed, just lived through. The small producers who are doing interesting worthwhile things will have to become very clever in their marketing/sales efforts, learning how to build up their direct channel sales. Unfortunately, the skills that make you a good grape grower/winemaker are not the same skills as being a good marketer, and everyone needs all of those skills if they are to survive. A real pity.

**T:** HOW HAS THE ECONOMIC DOONTURN AFFECTED BONNY DOON?

**G:** It has been very tough for us. We have had to doon-size significantly to achieve a scale that is economically viable, and still the jury is out as to whether we can find the right product mix<sup>6</sup> that will work. I've just sold our vineyard in Soledad, which, granted, was not the world's greatest vineyard, but something I was compelled to do to keep the wheels on.

6) GRAHM: "INSERT 'WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CASE OF SYRAH AND A CASE OF THE CLAP?' JOKE HERE. (ANSWER: EVENTUALLY THE CLAP WILL GO AWAY.)"



# AND GOING OUT OF MY WAY TO BE PERSONALLY OFFENSIVE HAS NOT TERRIBLY HELPED MY CAUSE.

**T:** IF YOU WERE TO PACK UP AND MOVE TO A DIFFERENT WINE REGION OF THE WORLD, WHERE WOULD IT BE?

**G:** As I may have said once or twice before, there are many places in Europe I would love to make wine, but if I were making wine elsewhere, likely I would already be in jail for contravening one regulation or another. I like the fact that there are more degrees of freedom here in the New World, and still places where you can, if at least for a while, grow grapes on their own roots without morbid fear of phylloxera. Yeah, it would be cool to grow grapes in Burgundy or the Wachau, but I don't think that my particular skills would be very helpful there. They know how to do what they do far better than I ever could. My only real contribution might be to do something just totally orthogonal to the rest of the world, and that's hard in a more traditional area. But, since you asked, I think that it would be very cool to live in Piemonte. At least one would eat and drink well.

**T:** IN YOUR WRITINGS YOU COME OFF AS SOMEONE WHO IS ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING. IF I'M RIGHT ON THIS, WHAT ARE YOU PRIMARILY SEARCHING FOR AND WHAT DO YOU PEG YOUR ODDS AT FINDING IT? IF I'M WRONG, WHY IS IT THAT YOU SOUND LIKE YOU ARE SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING?

**G:** OK, I say in the book that I am searching for *terroir*. I'm beginning to think, at least this week, that I am perhaps being a tad naïve (as I mentioned earlier) in this particular pursuit. While I may inadvertently produce wines that exhibit some degree of *terroir*, very likely this will not be something that occurs in my lifetime. I think that I really need to redefine what it is that will give me real satisfaction, if a Faustian character such as myself can be said to ever derive satisfaction. I think that it has to be less of a search for a something and more of an appreciation of the process itself. I'm thinking now that perhaps the best thing that I can do is to create an interesting set of conditions — dry-farming, maybe the hybridization of a family of grapes (presumably Rhônes) and planting out a genetically diverse range of seedlings — and watching closely to see what happens. In a weird way, this makes a lot more sense than gunning for *terroir*.

**T:** YOU OBVIOUSLY SEEM TO THINK THAT "CALIFORNIA TERROIR" ISN'T AN OXYMORON. WHAT MAKES YOU CONVINCED THAT CREATING WINES WITH "A SENSE OF PLACE" IN CALIFORNIA IS POSSIBLE?

**G:** Well it may be an oxymoron, if only because of the extreme improbability of discovering it. The other issue is really our fairly dry and generally warm growing conditions. I think that *terroir* most likely expresses itself in milder climates where there can be a really nuanced articulation of the variety itself. Overly dry climates I think might stress vines too much some years for the nuances to emerge. Yeah, you may well get great concentration, but the prune yard is never far away. And of course if you irrigate said vineyard to relieve the stress, a discussion of *terroir* makes no sense at all.



**T:** SERIOUSLY, HOW MANY TIMES DO YOU CONSULT A THESAURUS WHEN WRITING? WHERE THE HELL DID YOU ACQUIRE YOUR VOCABULARY?

**G:** *Sans Roget, je suis rien*. But I'm too lazy a writer these days and have somewhat tired of the overly baroque style. Don't quite know where the vocabulary came from, but I might recommend S. J. Perelman for connoisseurs of *sesquipedalia*. Maybe Stanley Elkin? David Foster Wallace?

**T:** IN BOTH WRITING AND WINE-MAKING, WHAT DO YOU FIND MOST REWARDING, THE PROCESS OR THE END RESULT?

**G:** Process definitely more rewarding than end result. I find I experience post partum depression both in winemaking and in writing.



T: MALBEC IS HOT, YET SUITABLY AN "UGLY DUCKLING."<sup>7</sup> GONNA PLANT IT?

G: No. I don't do bordelais cépages. And to Footnote #8: I don't think that I've been given mediocre scores simply because I work with (or have tended to work with) oddball grapes. It has been because a) for a while the wines were not as good as they could have been, b) the style has not been as showy or as obvious as many critics seem to prefer, and c) I've been slightly insufferable with influential critics themselves.

T: ANY REDUCTIVE ISSUES WITH SCREWCAPS?<sup>8</sup>

G: Some mild issues with our bigger wines when we were first getting the hang of it, and that resulted perhaps in some of our wines not being as universally appreciated as I might have liked to have seen. I'm totally convinced that the phenomenon of mild post-bottling reductive "issues" actually redounds to the greater glory of the wine. But one may well have to wait for a few years for the issue to resolve itself. This "problem" also occurs with wines sealed with a cork in great vintages. Great 2005 Burgundies come to mind — they are all utterly closed up now or stinky.

T: HOW WILL YOU ENSURE THAT AMÉLIE IS FIT TO ASCEND TO "FIRST LADY FOR LIFE?"<sup>9</sup>

G: Pray. And I do agree with your assessment in the footnote that she is by far the greatest thing that I (not single-handedly) produced.

T: WHAT, CURRENTLY, IS YOUR STRANGEST WINE? DO PEOPLE ACTUALLY BUY IT?

G: Strangest wine probably currently proffered is our "Pommeau," which is really not that strange. It is apple juice fortified with apple brandy that has had two years of barrel ageing; we sell it in the tasting room and to some very, very hip San Francisco restaurants.

T: IT SEEMS A "NEW TEMPERANCE" MOVEMENT IS TAKING ROOT — PARTICULARLY ACROSS THE POND. THOUGHTS?

G: Yeah, I am concerned about the new temperance movement in Europe. It is rather creepy, I have to say. It's hard to say that you're in favour of drunk driving (I'm not), but young French people seem to have stopped drinking French wine, and it seems almost more like a bad omen — a bird of prey defecating on your doorstep or whatever we think of as ominous these days.

T: WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T MAKING WINE?

G: Don't know, but something perhaps equally convoluted; I think that my brain craves complication.

T: WHEN I INTERVIEWED YOU BACK IN THE 1990S YOU SAID THAT WINEMAKING WAS RELATIVELY EASY BUT WRITING WAS VERY DIFFICULT. IN THE INTRO OF *BEEN DOON SO LONG* YOU SAY THAT BASICALLY THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE.

G: I am certainly a much better writer now than I was. To do either really well is bloody difficult. I think that back then I foolishly just had no comprehension of how difficult it was to make really great wine *de novo* in the New World. And I was trying to make you feel good.

T: THANKS FOR THAT. ANYTHING I'VE MISSED?

G: What you didn't ask me was why do I imagine BDV wines are so successful in Canada? At least in Quebec, they are crazy successful, and in Ontario, especially in Ottawa, and elsewhere they do reasonably well.

Well, Tod, I'm glad you asked me that. For some reason, maybe like ducklings imprinting themselves on whatever they imprint themselves on — appliances, whatever — the Quebecois, especially the Montrealers, have just taken to Bonny Doon and won't let go. I think that it is largely the result of the numerous visits on the part of my colleague, Alex Krause, who speaks French beautifully, and perhaps also my game efforts to struggle through in my own pitiful version of the language whenever I come to visit. But I think that it may be also (to a far lesser extent) the wines themselves. They are in some sense a bridge between the Old World and New World — the aesthetics of the Old and the gosh darn exuberance of the New. Maybe this particular conjugation works particularly well for Canadians. But it is absolutely great to be treated like a hero. ☐

7) GRAHM INSISTS ON PLANTING GRAPES THAT NOBODY (NOT EVEN THE WINE WRITERS) HAVE HEARD OF, PRACTICALLY GUARANTEEING MEDIOCRE SCORES AND, CONSEQUENTLY, SALES

8) SEE THE FASCINATING ESSAY ON WINE DEFECTS, *TIDINGS*, APRIL 2010

9) AMÉLIE IS GRAHM'S DAUGHTER, UNDOUBTEDLY HIS FINEST CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD. GRAHM'S SELF-GIVEN MONIKER IS "FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT FOR LIFE," WHATEVER.