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Randall Grahm

Bonny Doon Vineyard, Santa Cruz, California

The philosopher of California wine is planting a new garden.

Bonny Doon Vineyard
P.O. Box 8376
Santa Cruz, CA 95061
www.bonnydoonvineyard.com

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(831) 425-4518
Tasting Room open at noon daily
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The name Randall Grahm evokes many associations: owner of Bonny Doon winery since 1983, original Rhône Ranger, terroir-ist extraordinaire, avid user of screwcaps since 2001, devotee of Biodynamic practices since 2004, first to put ingredient labels on wines, hippie winemaker, witty marketer, and "national treasure"—as he was dubbed by Robert Parker for his creation of Le Cigare Volant (literally "The Flying Cigar," the French term for a flying saucer). Throughout these sometimes whimsical pursuits run the threads of honesty and truth.

For Grahm, the key to a great wine is originality. When he took a good look at his wines and viticultural practices a few years ago, however, he found that neither were particularly distinctive nor original and, furthermore, that he was ignoring his own proclamations on terroir. Add to this the birth of his first child, Amelie, with his partner, Chinshu Huang, and his bout with osteomyelitis in the neck, and it's little wonder that Grahm fell into a period of reflection, introspection, and analysis.

What resulted was a refocusing and a paring back. Grahm sold off product lines such as Big House and Cardinal Zin and reorganized Pacific Rim as a company (which he still owns) independent of Bonny Doon. When he was finished, his portfolio of three dozen wines was down to about 12. Production dropped from 450,000 cases in 2006 to 35,000 cases in 2007, and he has been purchasing grapes from all over the world to supplement the output of his Ca' del Solo vineyard in Soledad, Calif., where he grows Italian varietals.

Now, at age 56, he is once again on a path of reinvention. This time, Grahm is creating a new vineyard in San Juan Bautista, Calif.—a vineyard based on the truths of his ideas and winemaking philosophy.

After attending a Bonny Doon tasting dinner in New York City in January, I met Grahm a day later for breakfast at the Empire Diner in Chelsea. Sick with a cold from a couple of weeks on the road, he ordered oatmeal as we started our conversation.

PATRICIA SAVOIE

Photos courtesy of Bonny Doon Vineyard

What did you want to be before you became a winemaker?

Oh, everything. I studied pre-med in school. I thought I might write novels or books.

How did you get to wine?

Well, when you drink a great Burgundy, things kind of take care of themselves. Great Pinot Noir is one of the best things in the world. I love Pinot Noir.

But you're probably best known for your Cigare Volant, your "homage to Châteauneuf-du-Pape." How has that wine evolved over the years?

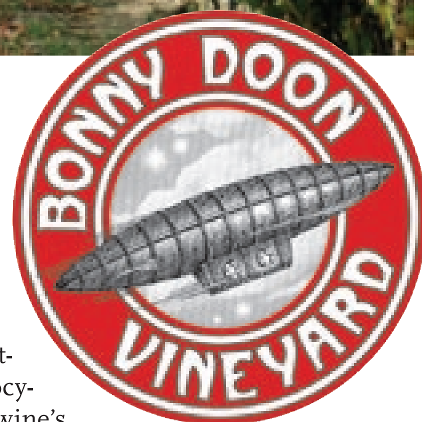
Cigare is our meditation on red wine—what we know and believe about red wine. And it's still a work in progress. When I first made it back in 1984, nobody knew what Grenache and Mourvèdre and Syrah were. There were only three Syrah vineyards in California, and they weren't very good. Now, there are a lot of not-very-good Syrah vineyards.

In Châteauneuf, Grenache is the main varietal component, so I adhered to that formula. Apart from here in the New World, no one in France would ever imagine putting Grenache in small barrels for aging. So initially, we aged the wine in a large, upright wooden tank and had a very good result. The early wines were lovely, but somewhat compulsively, I had to continue to experiment, and I wanted to increase the amount of Cigare that we were producing. So a bit like the almonds in Hershey bars, we gradually decreased the amount of Grenache in Cigare, replacing it with some very beautiful old-vine Mourvèdre, but the wine's character definitely changed. Certainly, the darkest days of Cigare were in '97 and '98. I foolishly used synthetic closures for the wine, and while it initially was great—the ones in large format are absolutely brilliant—the 750 milliliters sealed with a synthetic closure began to oxidize rapidly. In 1999 and 2000, we went back to real corks, then in 2001 to screwcaps, which are more oxygen-exclusionary, so the wine ages slowly, a bit like the original concept of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. In the future, I want to take it to another level and *really* slow the aging. Where slow ends and retardation starts, I don't know, but we shall see. We put 25% of the 2008 wine in 5-gallon glass demijohns and will leave them there for several years before bottling. There will be very little oxygen, so a slow maturation.

Bonny Doon's Ca' del Solo vineyard in Soledad, Calif.

So the slow aging contributes to the longevity of the wine?

Yes, but there are other factors as well. Minerals are perhaps the determining components of longevity in a wine; they give it substance and work synergistically with the natural antioxidants in wine—the anthocyanins and tannins—to enhance the wine's ability to tolerate oxygen. In the vineyard, it's the microflora in the soil that transport minerals into the roots of the wines; apart from potassium, which passively enters the roots, grapevines need soil mycorrhizae to actively bring minerals in. The best formula for longevity in wines is low yields, small vines, no irrigation, and a healthy soil microflora.



Patricia Savoie is a freelance wine and culinary travel writer based in New York City. She is associate editor of Celebrity Chef Tour magazine, a publication of the James Beard House.

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You can do a simple test to know whether the wine you drink is capable of long aging: it won't oxidize rapidly—that is to say, if you drink a few glasses from the bottle and put the cork (or better, screwcap) back in, it should be good to drink for three, four days, even a week. If the wine remaining in your bottle is DOA the following morning, chances are this is not a particularly healthy wine.

All your wines have been sealed with Stelvin closures for several years now. How is that working?

The screwcap is the other part of the oxygen equation. It has a real bearing on the potential of a wine. It's more reductive than cork, though an extremely good cork (a longer, denser cork) will resemble a screwcap in being very oxygen-exclusionary. There's been a spate of articles in the press on the phenomenon of post-bottling reduction in screwcapped wines, saying you are trading one issue for another: TCA for reduction. But that's not entirely accurate. The "reduction" they refer to comes from the sulfur compounds that we smell. Winemakers in the Southern Rhône believe it is important that their wine pass through a reductive stage, and for that reason, they put it in a large vessel rather than a small one. The more reduced conditions of the large tank will create some compounds that we may not particularly enjoy smelling, but these "reduction" products are aromatic precursors of other compounds that develop later in the evolution of the wine, which give the wine great complexity—the leathery, meaty, truffly, bacon-fat notes that we adore. Not properly managing the reductive phase in winemaking compromises a wine's ability to age. It's a bit tricky to explain, but it involves understanding how to manage the reductive potential of wine along its development path, to see where it is in its evolution—like the back end of oxygen management in the early stages of a wine's development.

What lessons have you learned about oxygen management?

I've been interested in oxygen management of wine for 25 years, actually. It's determined by how much oxygen is able to permeate into the storage vessel, which is a function of the size of barrels, thickness of the wood, temperature of the cellar, that sort of thing. Early in my career, I discovered micro-oxygenation, which is a technique for managing tannins by adding minute volumes of oxygen to the wine at the end of primary fermentation; it's a powerful tool, which needs to be used very judiciously so as not to compromise the integrity of the wine or homogenize its style. Managing the reductive phase of a wine's life occurs later, as the wine sits in the cellar, and this means allowing it to get a bit funky, but not overly so. Allowing the wine to become a bit reduced is a way of charging its batteries, as it were, and that definitely correlates with an enhanced life span and certainly greater complexity.

So it turns out that the things you can do that are anti-efficient, anti-fiscally responsible, are generally really good for the wine. It screws up the bottom line, but it's really good for the wine. I am now trying to focus on making wines that are really distinctive and good. And that is not easy to do. You can easily fall on your face.

Do you think the Rhône Rangers have become irrelevant?

Maybe they were too successful; we've seen an enormous proliferation of Syrah vineyards, and I'm a bit ambivalent about that. One thing about the New World wine industry is its ability to create and destroy categories in incredibly short order. I love Syrah, adore it. But I don't want to see it grown in the wrong places—that just ends up turning people off. People misunderstand Syrah. The Australians misunderstand Syrah. Syrah is the spiritual brother of Pinot Noir, a wine of finesse and delicacy. Proper Syrah is elegant, fragrant, with a funky, earthy, savory character—it is a great wine for gastronomy. I'm not sure that Syrah wants to be grown in an area where it is too warm and the grapes are overly stressed; you end up with Shiraz, and I'm not interested in doing that.

What areas of the wine world have you learned from recently?

Friuli is really interesting. I want to understand what the amphorists are up to. How do you make amphorae? How do you make wine in them? There's a fellow in Sicily, Giusto Occhipinti at COS winery, who's brilliant. He more or less ferments in amphora, racks the wine out after a few months, puts it back, lets it sit, then bottles it. The wine is great. I love the idea of doing nothing to the wine. Simplifying the whole thing.

How did your philosophy develop into the idea of a new vineyard?

The quest for a new property, a new canvas, has been somewhat of an iterative one: the ultimate objective has gradually come into focus,

New vineyard site in San Juan Bautista, Calif.

and, of course, the focus has in no small part been impacted by the current economic reality. When the process began, I was still thinking in the box. I wanted an Estate—the thought being that one can control grape quality to a much greater extent than one can from purchased fruit. And I was keen to produce wines that somehow expressed terroir.

I am drawn to the notion of *vins de terroir* not because this is a cute marketing gimmick, but because, for me, a *vin de terroir* is the only wine that in some sense really matters. It is the only kind of wine that could really be said to make the world more interesting. I have been meditating, ruminating, obsessing most of my career about what exactly it means to express terroir. For me, it has a lot to do with a site's ability to solve a vine's "issues"—water (enough or too much), light and heat (enough or too much), nutritional availability, air drainage, and so on—with particular elegance.

So what were you looking for in terms of terroir?

You can never tell with absolute certainty where or what will represent a great terroir in the New World without the benefit of many generations of iteration, but at a minimum, it would seem that you need first a site that has a long enough growing season, coupled with a relatively cool climate—basically about as cool as it can possibly be to get grapes to ripen most of the time. You want to produce a wine that has a lot of varietal articulation, with adequate acidity so you don't have to mess with "fixing" it.

Secondly, you need a site that has adequate rainfall and moisture-holding capacity to farm without irrigation. This necessity of dry farming is somewhat of an ideological position for me. I was told that one can dry-farm grapes virtually anywhere in California if the vineyard is set up to do that from the get-go, but one must be willing to live with profoundly low yields in those areas of low rainfall. Not wishing the project to be a total economic disaster, we were then looking for areas that had *reasonable* rainfall. The problem in California is that areas of high rainfall, such as the Bonny Doon area in the Santa Cruz Mountains, are often associated with highly leached soils, and if a soil is overly leached of minerals, that negates one of the other criteria, which is to have a reasonably high mineral content. One is looking specifically for a reasonable percentage of clay in the soil, a good cation-exchange capacity—that is to say, all the favorable minerals in good ratio. The idea is that you don't want to have to schlep in major quantities of amendments to "fix" the soil, which works contrary to the idea of terroir.

What did you have in mind to produce from the new vineyard?

The original idea was to find an appropriate Cigare vineyard—one that would allow us to grow Grenache and Syrah and maybe Mourvèdre. This is a bit problematic, as you have to have a very wide range of exposures and climatic regimes to be able to do all of this. For example, Mourvèdre needs a lot more heat than the others. So we were then looking at potentially two sites to do the whole Cigare complement, which might have been potentially doable had we, as a company, been generating scads of cash. But we are still working hard to get to positive cash flow after the reconfiguring of the company, and the economic downturn has not made that any easier. Further complicating matters was the

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fact that as much as I love the idea of the Cigare, what I truly love most of all is Pinot Noir. So, the idea of *three* vineyards—one for Grenache and Syrah, one for Mourvèdre, and one for Pinot, all reasonably proximal to one another and all with brilliant soil, topographical, and climatic characteristics—was temporarily floated. Alas, barring a major turnaround in the fortunes of the company, this is not a likely scenario.

There were numerous false starts. It seemed that there was always one issue or another. One property was used as a former gun range, and it was a while before we realized that there might be issues with lead in the soil; there were.

How did you finally settle on San Juan Bautista?

I went out on many, many Realtor dates. I can't tell you for sure how I ended up settling on 280 acres outside San Juan Bautista on a northeast-facing hillside, except to say that it feels reasonably close to my center. It seems to have an extraordinary magic. It's not perfect—the rainfall is not quite as high as I would like (about 18 inches annually)—but I think that it is still dry-farmable for reds. Eventually, we may want to think about irrigating the whites to gain a little more finesse. The soils are interesting, lots of clay and good rooting depth and even some pockets of very concentrated limestone. The exposures are quite favorable—lots of eastern and northeastern exposures. It's been a tenet of my belief system that, in general, California is too warm and too bright for most *vinifera* grapes. To produce wines of real finesse, you want to avoid the afternoon sun.

How do you feel about the site now?

Ultimately, we won't know until we try, but I think that this project will enable us to do something very different and atypical for California. The first vines we plant will be Pinot Noir. We will try to dry-farm and are setting up the vineyard to do so: planting rootstock first and then field-budding it. This is still a bit of a moving target, but one of the key elements of success on the site is our ability to mitigate the force of the wind. Tree rows and windbreaks will be very important.

I'm even looking for some *peche de vigne* trees to plant among the vine rows. This white peach is a tradition in France, like rosebushes, as an early indicator of disease. And of course, we will bring in animals, partially as part of the Biodynamic protocol, but also because they truly bring a different quality of life to the site.

What is the timeline for the new vineyard?

We closed on the property in May. We'd already begun clearing the land by importing 800 goats. The goats were with us for a month. Then we brought in some heavier equipment to do a little tree clearing. We have also brought in cows to graze on other parts of the property to enhance fertility. We're putting in cover crop as a means of erosion control and bringing in more goats to help mulch it in. There are a lot of moving parts to the land development. We have dowsed for water, and in June, we drilled the well. There are still some landslide studies that need to be completed, some mitigation plans: for example, every oak that is removed has to be replaced by two or three new ones. Then there is fencing and everything else. At the end of the day, I am hoping that we will be able to plant approximately 3 acres of Pinot Noir this winter and defer the majority of the planting to following years. So the first usable crop is likely five years out.

What do you think has been your driving force in winemaking?

I don't know—maybe passion or idealism. My criticism of the wine business (and, in fact, of modern culture) is that it's too self-conscious—cynical and decadent and dated. The problem is making it work as a business, as an enterprise. I think the downfall of the wine business is its success, when it becomes a real business. So if you run it as a business, you have to compromise. And a certain amount of integrity is lost. I know some winemakers who don't like their own wine, but still make it because they get high point scores and it sells. I have a problem with that.

I've engaged in relentless experimentation, and I don't think that will change. I'm proud of the pioneering work we've done with Rhône grapes, Riesling, *microbullage* (micro-oxygenation), cryoextraction, and now with reductive *élevage*. The marketing schtick I'm less proud of. To my lasting shame, it has helped make the world safe for "critter labels" (though we never had one).

How has fatherhood changed the way you look at yourself and Bonny Doon?

On one hand, there's an economic necessity to provide for my family, so I can't be quite so cavalier in taking risks. But then—I don't know whether it was fatherhood or age—something

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clicked. I realized I can't remain a dilettante in my work; I have to feel I'm really challenging myself. I don't know if it's a matter of pride or a desire to be exemplary or some combination, but I feel there's a lot more I need to accomplish, or try to accomplish, before I go.

Does your daughter show any interest in being a winemaker?

It's too early to tell, though she is currently obsessed with making all sorts of herb-based infusions from our garden.

Would it please you if she went that direction?

Oh, of course. Utterly. It would probably break my heart if she didn't.

What winemakers do you admire?

Paul Draper of Ridge; Sean Thackrey; Thierry Allemand in Cornas; Emidio Pepe, a producer in Abruzzo who ages wines in glass carboys. Anyone who is taking chances, who is willing to push the frontier, I admire.

What do you think of the current state of restaurant wine lists?

I am not happy with the egregious markups that exist in so many places. But in general, I think wine lists are a lot more interesting than they have ever been.

What advice would you offer to sommeliers?

Don't be cynical. Make it possible for customers to move out of their safety zones, to take chances, whether it's offering a 2-ounce taste and more wines by the glass or creating information-based wine lists where people can actually learn something about the wine. Sell wines that go with the food, for god's sake. I love the idea of tasting menus with wine pairings. I'd like to see the aperitif wines come back. They seem to have disappeared as a category. More Sherries. More Kirs. They are transitional elements, easing you into the meal.

You've always been a prolific writer, and now you have a book coming out.

The title of the book is *Been Doon So Long: A Randall Grahm Vinthology* ($34.95, University of California Press, 2009), and it is a compendium of essays, poems, stories, etc. It's a bit anticlimactic for me now. I was so absorbed in it for a year and a half, and now it's done, and there is a big, gaping hole. What to do with my time?

Photo by Alex Kraus

Grahm with daughter Amelie in 2006.

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