

**Interview: Randal Graham**  
**Renowned California Winery Owner and Winemaker at Bonny Doon Vineyard**  
 by Kathy Sullivan

It is always fascinating to talk with winemakers about their interest in wine and to discover what lays behind their intense interest in producing wines. While we did have the opportunity to attend Randall Graham's presentation at a conference in Richmond, a couple of years ago, we did not interview him at the time.

Recently I contacted Randall Graham about a unique wine he is producing at Bonny Doon Vineyard. He kindly agreed to answer interview questions by email. More information about Randall Graham is available online. Many thanks to Graham for taking the time to respond to our questions.

***Wine Trail Traveler:*** *You have been a wine enthusiast for a long time. What is it about wine that influences your enjoyment of winemaking and wine growing?*

**Randall Graham:** Wine is or at least can be utterly magical, capable of instilling artistic/aesthetic inspiration as well as courage and consolation/solace in we fragile mortals. There are some wines that are so utterly complex and seemingly perfect that they are emotionally moving; you can't say that about ordinary fruit juice, can you? What I like best about wine-growing (which is, b/t/w, the term of art that really best describes what we should be doing) is the fact that it offers an enormous satisfaction in seeing the completion of a very long and complex process, from planting a vineyard, tending one's vines and then shepherding the resulting produce. Taking it further, unless you are making wine strictly for yourself, you have to then successfully introduce this wine to the world, "World, meet wine; wine, world." This, in and of itself, requires yet another distinctive skill set. So, in sum, the wine biz offers someone the opportunity to really exercise every possible mental, physical, aesthetic and spiritual muscle.

***Wine Trail Traveler:*** *How would you describe your wine journey?*

**Randall Graham:** Extremely long and convoluted, with many missteps along the way, but also with some extremely good fortune (like meeting Kermit Lynch almost forty years ago, who got me pointed in the right direction.) Without being too New Agey about it, it has also been a sort of spiritual journey, i.e. gradually drawing me closer to my deepest values and learning how to be present. (Those are still lessons to be learned.)

***Wine Trail Traveler:*** *To what do you contribute your success as a winemaker and winery owner?*

**Randall Graham:** Having had a good, broad-based liberal education, having some ability as a synthesizer of ideas, and also having some extraordinary good luck at being in the wine business at a time when it was just burgeoning. Entering the wine business for the first time at this stage would be just murder. It could be argued that I've been somewhat successful more in spite of my limitations than due to any particular talents. (I am a terrible business person, b/t/w.)

***Wine Trail Traveler:*** I read your book *Been Doon So Long*. Have you plans to write another wine book? If so, what topic will you focus on? When do you expect it to be published?

**Randall Graham:** I'm not sure if I have the energy or the mental acuity any more to write another wine book, but if I did, it would be a very detailed account of my attempt to produce a true vin de terroir in California. It would be a very different book than *Been Doon So Long*, not nearly as funny, that is for certain. I think that it will have to be at least five more years before the book is published, as it will take at least that long to collect anything like some reasonable data from our experimental work. Even then, it will be a lot more about process than about product.

***Wine Trail Traveler:*** *You were inducted into the Who's Who of Cooking in America. Do you believe that wine can be successfully used as an ingredient in some recipes? If so, why can wine be an important ingredient for a successful recipe?*

**Randall Graham:** I do subscribe to the idea that you don't want to use mediocre wine in any recipe, but neither is it necessary to use grand cru Burgundy in boeuf bourguignon.

***Wine Trail Traveler:*** *In 2015 you held a successful fundraiser to create a wine from grapevines that are expressive of place. My understanding of the fundraiser was that in ten years you hope to research and create a variety that reflects America. Does this adequately describe your focus at Popelouchum? Would you like to elaborate on Popelouchum?*

**Randall Graham:** It was a crowd-funding initiative to raise funds to initiate work in beginning to breed a number of unique grape varieties with several particular aims, but not really to create a variety that reflects America, per se. (Neither a Trump or trumpetvine). The aim of the initiative is essentially twofold: In creating a vast amount of new germplasm one might either a) discover new varieties that have particularly useful agronomic or organoleptic properties, i.e. disease resistance, unusual flavor characteristics and/or are particularly well suited to my individual site in San Juan Bautista, or b) in making wine from such a large set of genetically distinctive individual vines, i.e. suppressing varietal expression, might this be a useful strategy for revealing the unique terroir of my site?

***Wine Trail Traveler:*** *With your vast experience, do you have suggestions for smaller wineries (2,500 to 5,000 cases) on how to be successful? From our interviews with winery owners, we have concluded that most wineries are not independently successful until the 3rd generation.*

**Randall Graham:** I think that as far as a business model, we are living in a new world of wine, and I'm not sure if much received wisdom continues to obtain. It seems to be very hard to build on much of anything these days, as the marketplace is in many instances tragically addicted to the new and distinctive, and it could be said, the most neuro-active embedded meme. I think that there are still opportunities in the wine business, but in light of the enormous level of world-wide competition, one has to be enormously clever and lucky.

***Wine Trail Traveler:*** *After all of your successes, where do you go from here over the next five to 10 years?*

**Randall Graham:** If the gods are cooperative, I would be very content to spend most/all of my time at my farm in San Juan Bautista, learning to really see things for the first time.