

Chicago Tribune

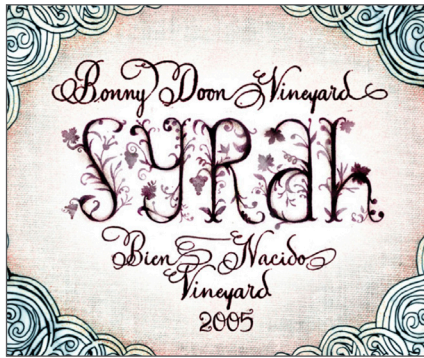
January 20, 2010

Bonny Doon founder is a punster d'vine

Not only does Randall Graham make great wine, but his eye-catching labels and skewering of pretensions can be real corkers

wdaley@tribune.com

Randall Graham is the legendary founder of California's Bonny Doon Vineyard, noted for creating delicious Rhone-style wines. He is an innovator not only in the vineyard, where he fearlessly experiments with different grape varieties, but also in the marketplace, where his eye-catching labels and fondness for outrageous punning have long entertained consumers.



A Bonny Doon syrah label. (HANDOUT / December 6, 2009)

Graham has his opinions, especially about what makes good wine. He has not been shy about skewering the pretensions of California's wine industry in his writings, a collection of which has just been published under the title "Been Doon So Long: A Randall Graham Vinthology" (University of California Press, \$34.95). Here, via e-mail, he answers questions about wine and his career.

Q. Why do you make wine?

A. Good question, and my motivations (as the good Dr. Freud will tell us) have certainly been mixed, if not mixed-up, but, in any event, have continued to evolve. I think that when I first started I was relatively naive about what a winemaker actually did (never imagined there would be so much travel and wine-schlepping). I imagined (pretty correctly, as things turned out), that the "lifestyle" of a winemaker would be attractive, not so much due to the gauzy soft-focus vineyard tableaux (which are in fact quite lovely), but rather because one is asked to draw upon one's diverse talents, and is always working in a different, challenging capacity.

I make wine these days for two reasons: 1. It is something that I'm capable of doing well (and probably the most efficient way to remain gainfully employed); and 2. winegrowing, sort of by default, has become my artistic/spiritual path; in other words, this is how I will (if I can) bring some beauty into the world and learn how to become more present with myself.

Q. You've been in the business a long, long time. How do you think your wines have changed? How have you changed as a winemaker? What has been the catalyst for change in your life/career?

A. Certainly the biggest change in my own wines has been the migration from producing wines that were cosmetically attractive (better living through chemistry) to wines produced in a more hands-off, natural fashion, imbued with greater life force, and ultimately, one hopes, capable of evincing some sense of the place from which they derive. Another way of saying this is that I've become aware of the ultimate banality of vins d'effort and of the sublime preciousness of vins de terroir. ... For the longest time, I made wines to try to please other people (typically influential wine critics), but I am now making wines to please myself. The catalyst for change in my career has been the gradual apprehension of my own mortality and the desire to: 1. make some sort of real contribution; and 2. leave this earth with minimal regrets for paths untaken.

Q. The wine industry, particularly in California, has often been an object of your scorn. What is the industry doing wrong? What is the industry doing right?

A. The industry on every level has become largely allergic to taking real chances, and from the low-end to the top-end (with a few notable exceptions) has become incredibly cynical and rather formulaic. Rather like big-budget motion pictures, execs are playing it safe, giving the customer what they imagine the customer wants, rather than what the consumer needs (something distinctive and original). What is the industry doing right? Lots of well-designed, clever wine labels, though some of them are just too over-the-top, even for me.

Q. What is your forecast for wine over the next decade?

A. I imagine a number of vineyards and wineries disappearing. The level of competition in the business right now is just absolutely insane and unsustainable. It does appear at least in the near term that wineries that are small and exceptionally well-differentiated as well as those that are monstrously large and fiendishly efficient have the greatest likelihood of viability and success, and virtually everything in the middle will not work so well.

The wines of Randall Graham

Le Cigare Volant: Flagship Rhone red blend of grenache, mourvedre, syrah and cinsault

Le Cigare Blanc: White blend of grenache blanc and roussanne

Vin Gris de Cigare: Rosé blend of grenache, cinsault, mourvedre, syrah, grenache blanc and roussanne

Le Vol des Anges: A dessert wine made from roussanne grapes

Vinferno: Dessert wine made from a blend of roussanne and grenache blanc

Syrah Le Pousseur: A blend of 96 percent syrah and 4 percent grenache.

Ca' del Solo: A series that includes albarino, muscat, dolcetto, nebbiolo, sangiovese