

# CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



## Syrah

Leader of the  
Rhône Revolution

*The so-called "Rhône Revolution" is running into its third decade here in California, and the star of the show is still Syrah, the red grape that makes the wines from the northern Rhône region of France. Wine collectors know and admire bottlings from such well-regarded places as Côte Rotie, Hermitage and their lesser known but important neighbors in the area south of Lyon. It is there that Syrah is king and makes lots of complex, dramatic long-aging wines. That we did not have Syrah here in California in any meaningful way owes more to the confusion about varieties that has only been set right in the last couple of decades through an array of techniques, most recently and definitively through DNA analysis.*

But we do now have plenty of Syrah. Indeed, we have more Syrah than can be sold, and the grape is finding its way into all kinds of unusual blends. It is true that Syrah did once exist in Bordeaux and that the Aussies have long blended their Syrah, which they call Shiraz for no apparent good reason, with Cabernet Sauvignon. Seeing Syrah show up as a lesser but supportive portion of Cabernet here may not emulate current-day Bordelais practices, but it is neither a surprise nor a problem. Finding Syrah in Pinot Noir is a bit more bothersome, if only because the common wisdom is that Pinot should stand on its own.

It turns out that the Rhône river exits the northern region and runs south through another wine district about two hours drive, and that district is, not surprisingly called, the southern Rhône. Grenache is the leading variety there, and while Syrah is allowed in the blends that predominate in



*Krupp Brothers Black Bart Syrah and Black Bart's Bride White Rhone blend are pacesetters in this Issue.*

the southern Rhône in such famous areas as Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas and Vacqueyras, among others, it has traditionally been a minor or even ignored part of those blends. Yet those blends and the grapes that make them, along with the whites (excepting Viognier which we covered earlier in the year) of both north and south Rhône areas are the collective stars of the Rhône Revolution, and their appearance together in this Issue is not accidental. Nor is the appearance of Petite Sirah, a grape created in France a century and a half ago but not much planted there. It is planted here where it makes extra sturdy red wines. It turns out that Syrah is its daddy, and, more interestingly, that for the longest time, California vintners thought that Petite Sirah was actually Syrah itself.

There are short essays about those other grapes in the following pages, yet, aside from Petite Sirah, none of those others has as yet emerged in real stardom. We think we see glimmers of greatness for Grenache and Marsanne, but the sample size is still quite small. Time may see them emerge in their own rights, and thus, the wines reviewed in those sections can be thought of as possible precursors to the future. Finally, speaking of the future, our Centerfold has an essay by Associate Editor Steve Eliot about the visionary winemaker, Randall Grahm. Now too old to be called a "boy genius", Grahm remains one of the California wine scene's most intellectual, forward-thinking vintners.

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
IN APPRECIATION OF RANDALL GRAHM CENTERFOLD

JULY 2010

# Syrah

## **BONNY DOON Le Cigare Volant California 2006**

44% Syrah; 43% Grenache; 12% Cinsault; 1% Mourvedre. A good bit of lightly peppery spice immediately tags this one as counting Syrah in its mix, while subtle strains of raspberries and soft oak make for a fairly complete nose. Supple, slightly velvety and nicely balanced, the wine is restrained in ripeness, free of apparent heat and shows the cool-climate structure of a wine meant for aging. It is not and never will be a bold and blustery wine, but we like its precision and its promise to reveal layered complexity with age.

   **\$32.00**

## **BONNY DOON Le Pousseur Central Coast 2007**

Compact, unevolved and only hinting at richness just now, this intriguing Syrah steers a course well apart from the swaggering high-ripeness crowd. It shows flashes of dark soil, dried violets and graphite with a core of pert, red-berry fruit its major motif. It is narrowed by fairly firm acids but counts temperate tannins as a real plus, and it makes a good case that ageworthy wines need not be rugged or brash.




   **\$18.00**

# Roussanne

It may be unfair to Roussanne to refer to it as the lesser sister of Marsanne, but its role in life as a lighter, brighter wine whose energy often lifts Marsanne to greater heights is hard to overcome. Still, in the versions of the grape tasted for this issue, it is evident that Roussanne has plenty of goodness when made on its own. It is true that both highly recommended versions have big dollops of something else in their midsts, and we have barely scratched the surface of its potential here in California, but you could do worse than to try one of the more optimistically reviewed bottlings below.




## **BONNY DOON Le Cigare Blanc Beeswax Vyd. 2008**

**Arroyo Seco.** 57% Roussanne; 43% Grenache Blanc. Lightly blossomy, hinting at sweet limes and a little constrained as far as ripeness and outgoing fruit are concerned, Randall Grahm's proprietary white blend seems a bit bound up by its youth. It is at once both rounded and buoyed by cleansing acidity, and its glimpses of complexity make a good case for another year or two of further patience.

   **\$22.00**

## TASTING NOTE LEGEND




### OUTSTANDING WINES

-  **THREE STARS:** (95-98 points) An exceptional wine. Worth a special search of the market.
-  **TWO STARS:** (91-94 points) A highly distinctive wine. Likely to be memorable.
-  **ONE STAR:** (87-90 points) Fine example of a type or style of wine. Without notable flaws.









NOTE: Wines not marked with stars are often delightful wines. Each has unique virtues and any of these wines may be the best wine to serve your needs based on value, availability or for your dining and taste preferences. \*Prices – Approximately California full retail prices.

Connoisseurs' Guide tastings are conducted with  Riedel Stemware.





### AVAILABILITY

-  Generally available in most market areas.
-  Limited production and/or limited geographic distribution.
-  Very limited availability.
- GV** Good Value

### CHARACTERISTICS & TRADITIONAL USE WITH FOOD

-  Soft and fruity wine. Quaffable by itself or with light foods.
-  Crisp white. Medium acid and dry. Fish or delicate flavored foods.
-  Mellow white. Dry to slightly sweet. Enough acid for white meats.
-  Full and balanced dry White. Try with rich seafood and fowl dishes.
-  Light Red and powerhouse White. Fowl, veal and light meats.
-  Medium Red. Balanced, good depth, medium tannin. Beef and lamb.
-  Robust Red. Full tannin, intense flavors. For highly spiced meat dishes.
-  Sweet Dessert wine. Enjoyable by itself or with sweet desserts.

### DRINKABILITY

-  Drinkable now. Unlikely to improve with further aging.
-  Drinkable now. Further bottle aging can improve this wine.
-  Cellar for future drinking. Wine will improve with bottle aging.
-  Not suitable for drinking.

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# *the World according to* Randall

THE FOMENTERS OF CALIFORNIA'S GREAT WINE REVOLUTION HAVE GRAYED AND ARE GONE. THE FIRST FAR-SIGHTED ICONOCLASTS SUCH AS ANDRÉ TCHELISCHEFF, LEE STEWART, AND MARTIN RAY, AND THEIR HEIRS, ROBERT MONDAVI, JOE HEITZ AND JOE SWAN, TO NAME BUT A FEW, PAVED THE WAY AND CHANGED THE VINOUS WORLD FOR US ALL. THEY DREAMT OF WHAT COULD BE RATHER THAN WHAT WAS, AND, AMONG THOSE THAT HAVE FOLLOWED, FEW HAVE SO PASSIONATELY PICKED UP THE BATON AND CHARGED AHEAD WITH AS MUCH FREEWHEELING ZEAL AND OUTSIDE-THE-LINES THINKING AS THE IRREPRESSIBLE RANDALL GRAHM. THE FOUNDER AND SELF-PROCLAIMED "PRESIDENT FOR LIFE" OF BONNY DOON VINEYARD, RANDALL HIMSELF IS NOW, HOWEVER MUCH HE MIGHT ARGUE WITH CHAGRINED DISAGREEMENT, APPROACHING A CERTAIN GREY-EMINENCE STATUS AS HIS WINEMAKING ODYSSEY NEARS THE THIRTY-YEAR MARK.

We have known and liked Randall since the very beginning, and, as with most who would call him friend, we have been as fascinated by the man as much as by his wines. He is very much the philosopher-winemaker whose at times pole-changing notions of how a great wine is born have led him to seek answers in everything from invasive, manipulative winemaking and technical tweaks that he regards now as "tricks" to an embrace of biodynamic viticulture and strict dry-farming, which he has recently claimed with religious conviction is "more important than anything else". Yet along the different pathway that he has followed, there has also existed a preoccupation, indeed, a fascination with creating the consummate and affordable Everyman wine. He is sometimes a poet and sometimes a sly and enlightened fool (indelible memories of him resplendently dressed as Cardinal Zin and decked out in full Lone Ranger regalia come to mind), but it would be wrong to look at him as governed merely by whimsy, and he is anything but a chameleon whose adaptations rise from the need to anonymously blend into his changing surroundings. As much as his path may have zigged



and zagged over time, he is not one to simply let the latest trend of the day drive him wherever, and there is no question that, from winemaking to marketing, the drummer's beat that he hears is uniquely his own.

Yet it is a fact of life that we are unable to suppress the question of "what next" whenever we cast an eye in his direction. During an altogether remarkable evening recently, we were offered a moment to look back and reflect on the past even while hearing the confessions of a once-again-changing man, who at one and the same time is tinkering still with his signature wine, *Le Cigare Volant* and imagining new, indeed previously unheard of, ways to get wine sites to express themselves and their uniqueness. It was an evening devoted first to revisiting Graham's significant role as one of the first champions of Rhône varietals in California. That role needs no great elaboration here as it is widely known and accepted, and the subsequent, still-growing ranks of fellow "Rhône Rangers" owes much to his groundbreaking work. The wine with which he identifies most closely, and the one which has in so many ways become synonymous with Bonny Doon, is his California

version of French Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape under the now famous guise, Le Cigare Volant. A proprietary blend comprised of Grenache, Mourvèdre and Syrah with a dash of Cinsault and Carignane irregularly tossed into the mix, "Cigare", whose birth Randall admits was a "fun thing" rather than an attempt at "saving the world", was introduced to an unsuspecting public with the 1984 vintage, and the 2008 bottling will mark the wine's Silver Anniversary. To celebrate the occasion, Randall hosted an extraordinary dinner at the Manresa Restaurant in Los Gatos. Following a first course accompanied by five vintages of Le Cigare Blanc, a compelling wine made from the principal white grapes of the Rhône, the evening's honoree arrived, and there followed hour upon hour of discussion and dining during which all twenty-five vintages of Le Cigare Volant were presented.

Such a "vertical", multiple-vintage tastings of the same wine made over so many years is usually revealing of how vintage and the passing of time have left their subtle marks on what is a consistent expression of vineyard and vintner. In this case, however, the lesson was more one of "consistency be damned", and the changing faces of Le Cigare Volant over the years were essentially those of Grahm himself. Beyond a certain loose family tie compelled by its ever realigned mix of the same grapes, Le Cigare Volant first and foremost reflected, as few other Californian wines might, the unceasing restlessness of its recondite maker. Le Cigare Volant is what Randall refers to as a *vin d'effort*, or a composed wine, as opposed to a true *vin de terroir*, one that reflects a singular character of place. Ironically, and why would we not be surprised, Randall spent as much time in evangelical defense of his new dedication to producing the latter as he did in discourse on the changes that have marked Le Cigare Volant over the years. His affirmations that "the aesthetic of a *vin d'effort* will never be as ultimately compelling as that of a great *vin de terroir*" notwithstanding, the succession of Le Cigare Volant iterations and incarnations made for a reflective evening and provided real and delicious validation to Randall's early belief that such Mediterranean grapes are wonderfully suited to California climes. Some of the wines, such as the winery's last remaining bottle of the 1984 and the still powerful, stunningly vital 1985 poured from a twelve-liter format were rich and wholly involving efforts that have aged into great beauty. They by far outshone most of their younger compatriots. The wines of the nineties, for example, were marked with what seemed almost deliberate inconsistencies as Randall's experiments with cepage changes, new vineyard sources, additives and plastic Supremecorqs led to a disaster or two and made finding stylistic coherence difficult at best. As the millennia turned, lengthy lees contact, wild yeast selection, the

effects of reductive élevage and the introduction of Stelvin screw-cap closures began what Randall terms the "era of elegance", the aim of which was more aging potential and a shift away from overt fruit. More recently, the pendulum has swung away from proactive winemaking, favoring instead more attentive grape-growing and the elusive virtues of "natural" wines. One of Grahm's more unexpected admissions was that he, in fact, really did not care all that much for Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape. The wines are simply a bit too heavy, too tannic and too alcoholic for his taste, and that his first and enduring love was for Burgundy. Contradictions again, given that he has never put great effort into the making of Pinot Noir, or that he offers no disavowals or loss of affection for his most famous child, Cigare. Still, there seems in the evolving Randall Grahm a need to be distinctive and special and a gnawing sense that his wines were not. Not, mind you, that he conveys any desire to change the world, but merely to change his place within it and find something elemental, timeless and true. Burgundy is arguably the most site-driven of the world's great wine regions, and so has its message seduced Grahm. *Vin de terroir* is his new anthem.

At the end of what proved to be a very long and memorable evening punctuated by moments of confusion, new questions and great illumination alike, we could not help but wonder whither Randall might go next. Will Le Cigare Volant find the unique, consistently revealing voice of a true *vin de terroir* as Randall's talents are turned to the vineyard and finds the perfect Grenache as the wine's lynch pin, or will it remain as it has been, a wine of "becoming". Randall has been both questioned and praised in the press as often seeming to be one step ahead of the rest of the California wine industry, but chronically prone to lose focus. We rather see him as neither ahead nor behind, but off on a path of his own—and focus changed is focus nonetheless.

While the time for elegies lies far in the future, we find ourselves musing at how Randall might be remembered. Will he be seen as a visionary, a crazy poet howling at the moon, a man of great intent and fulfillment or as one a little too easily led astray by shiny objects? We suspect that most will recall him as being each and all. In the years yet ahead, it may well come to pass that an entirely new creation, a Grand Vin as yet unknown to Randall himself becomes his enduring achievement and great legacy. Just maybe all of the effort to date and all of the miles of what now seems a homeward-bound journey was simply the necessary crucible of real learning, and that what follows next was the point all along. We look forward with great anticipation to the next twenty-five years. We wish Mr. Grahm well, and we thank him for inviting us along for the ride from the beginning to today and hopefully long into the future.