

THE SAGE OF SANTA CRUZ

ADAM LECHMERE meets California's original Rhône Ranger, a multi-faceted Europhile bent on leaving a legacy greater than the one he's already created

PHOTOGRAPH: RANDALL GRAHM WAS PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR *DECANTER* BY THOMAS SKOVSENDE AT THE BLUE FIN BUILDING, LONDON

Randall **Graham: bespectacled, pony-tailed, hippy, uses the word 'dig' a lot, makes wines that defy analysis, prone to gnomic utterances. A lovable eccentric, a dreamer.**

Randall Graham: a business brain astute enough to build up the 28th largest winery in the US, in its heyday making half a million cases a year, through two major companies, Bonny Doon and Pacific Rim Winemakers.

Randall Graham: a philosopher, name-checking Heidegger and Kirkegaard among others, and prolific writer whose award-winning magnum opus, *Been Doon So Long*, is resonant with puns and endless parodies of the classics.

Take your pick, though three paragraphs do scant justice to the man himself.

His biography is simple. After three years studying philosophy at Santa Cruz university (he didn't complete the final paper), and a winemaking degree at UC Davis, Graham acquired a vineyard site at Bonny Doon in the Santa Cruz mountains. His first dream was to make Pinot Noir, but it transpired that the UC Davis data which convinced him of the viability of his site was faulty. 'I probably wasn't that far off good Pinot, but it was too warm. Maybe if I'd used different clones, or hadn't irrigated, it may have worked.'

He thought of moving up to Oregon, or Mendocino, or Sonoma, but he had gone to school in Santa Cruz and he liked it there. So eschewing Burgundy, he turned instead to the Rhône. 'I thought it'd be an interesting and fun thing to make a blend of the principal grape varieties of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, grown under California conditions.' His belief was well-founded. In 1984 he produced the first vintage of the wine with which he will forever be associated, Le Cigare Volant.

French for 'flying saucer', it was named after a 1980s Rhône by-law prohibiting the landing of UFOs in vineyards. As he says, it worked: no UFO has landed in the Rhône. Of all his diverse wines – at its height Bonny Doon was making 450,000 cases, including the Big House Red and Cardinal Zin brands, Old Telegram Mourvedre, Roussanne, Viognier, Le Pousseur Syrah, Riesling Sekt – Graham is most proud of Cigare. The 1984 and '85 are 'the best wines I ever made'.

Cigare, a blend of Grenache, Mourvedre, Syrah, and other classic Châteauneuf grapes, retails for about £27. *Decanter's* Steven Spurrier calls it 'a wine as unique as Australia's Grange'.

To make such acclaimed wines (though not everyone agrees – Graham is a member of what Robert Parker calls the 'anti-flavour wine elite') might be enough for many winemakers, but the Europhile in Graham won't let him rest. His writings constantly return to the concept that has dominated his life: the search for a true *vin de terroir*, not a *vin d'effort*.

He believes that the New World has only ever made 'composed' wines. 'It's very good at that. But not at making wines with great or long-lasting value.' Europeans, he feels, have an instinctive relationship with the soil that Americans and the rest of the New World just don't have.

'I find the European sensibility a lot more cordial; I like their appreciation of terroir. The best Europeans are more switched on, more in tune with the land, more observant. The lesser-endowed estates have more tricks up their sleeve than most New World winemakers. It's about respect for the land.'

So what is he doing in Santa Cruz? Why doesn't he go to Europe and make wine there? 'I'd love to, but I still have things I want to do here. I feel I can do more interesting things in the >

GRAHM AT A GLANCE

Born: 4 April 1953, Los Angeles

Education: Philosophy at UC Santa Cruz, then a Bachelor of Plant Science from UC Davis (viticulture specialisation)

Status: One daughter, Amélie (8) with his partner Chinshu Huang

Career: 'Chequered'. Before Bonny Doon, he worked as assistant winemaker at Dick Smothers Vineyard in Santa Cruz

He says: 'The 1993 Cigare is like living to be 200. It is the sun pouring through one's sieve-like body. It is the muted moan of violaceous violet'

They say: 'He's an intellectually restless ideas man, in love with concepts but not always able to transform them into wines' **Stephen Brook, *Decanter***



Right: of all the diverse and exceptional wines Randall Grahm has made, he is most proud of Le Cigare Volant (above)



New World. I'm trying to sort out what special gifts I've been given and how I can use them most productively.'

There is something endearing about a man who can talk about his 'special gifts' without sounding conceited. There is no doubt he's a gifted winemaker – if only for Cigare Volant and a handful of other exceptional wines (and some stinkers – the dry, acidic Ca' del Solo Albarino proves it's not a grape suited to California). This restless intellect led him to sell off Big House Red and Cardinal Zin to San Francisco-based The Wine Group in 2006, reducing Bonny Doon's output to 22,000 cases. He still owns Pacific Rim, a company he started in the 1990s, mainly to deal with his imports of Riesling from Washington, and from the Mosel, where he sourced grapes from Johannes Selbach until a few years ago. His Riesling now comes from his own biodynamic vineyard in the Wallula area of Washington.

So with the sell-off, was he trying to say, 'Now take me seriously – Bonny Doon is a genuine boutique winery'?

'For 99.95% of my career I've been trying to please other people. Now I'm learning to let things go'

'Let's leave the motivations to my psychotherapist,' he says, a bit testily. But why, then, spout endlessly about his motivations and internal wranglings? The 'ugly duckling' theme, for example, is one that pervades his writings: he describes it as 'a thematic that has dominated my own life since childhood – junior high school being the most painful memory. I do wonder how much of this drama I have brought to the winemaking process.' Surely this is the cry of the misunderstood genius – 'No one recognises my talent!'. So does he feel the need to be taken more seriously? 'Winemaking is a spiritual discipline for me: trying to be less self-directed, less dependent on the approval of others; following my internal compass. That's important to me.'

Grahm's internal compass must resemble Scott's at the North Pole – a wildly fluctuating needle rather than a steady pointer. He insists his drive to experiment is as powerful as ever. Yet he won't be tinkering with different grapes (to the relief of some Santa Cruz growers, I'm told) but embarking on a project that will take the rest of his life – and that of future generations.

He has bought 100 hectares of land at San Juan Bautista, a wild area (complete with a resident mountain lion) 50km south

of Santa Cruz. Some 36ha will be planted to 'Rhône and other grapes', and about 0.4ha will be given over to vines planted from seed and which, when grown, will be propagated using a process called massal selection. This is a labour-intensive, slow and expensive method by which outstanding vines are selected and new vines are propagated from their bud wood, creating a vineyard not from a single cloned vine but dozens of vines.

'Over time a grower can see which genotypes are best suited to that site. I am creating intentional randomness. The offspring may be inferior to the parent but, with enough offspring, there will be sufficient variation to create something quite complex.'

The project will take generations. 'It stands or falls on my ability, and it may fall on my daughter or grandchild to identify the relevant criteria for exclusion or inclusion. I'm setting up an interesting set of conditions for something to happen and then it devolves to me or someone else to figure it out.'

And so the restless experimentation continues. We will have to wait a long time to see the results of the San Juan Bautista project, but, whatever sort of wine it produces, it will be nothing less than interesting. And Grahm will be that much closer to his goal of creating a true *vin de terroir*.

This is the final project, he says. 'For 99.95% of my career I've been trying to please other people, making *vins d'effort*. Now I'm learning how to let things go, but in an enlightened way – to be receptive to conditions from which the wines can emerge and be interesting. If you have that straight and level path, things generally fall into place. If everything is right, the wine makes itself. But you have to be very clever to get there.'

The needle on Grahm's compass may have been spinning but now it's pointing along that straight and level path. **D**

NEXT MONTH: JACQUES LARDIERE, JADOT, BURGUNDY