

ON THE VINE GRAHM'S GAMBLE

A risky quest to make a unique American wine in San Juan Bautista

BY KURT FOELLER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TED HOLLADAY

Randall Graham zags when the rest of the wine industry zigs. And his uncanny knack for turning enough of his risky zags into highly visible marketing successes for Bonny Doon Vineyard has made him one of the most well-known—and often controversial—wine professionals in the United States.

Who put screw caps on premium wine bottles when market research said affluent customers wouldn't buy them? Graham, in 2000. Who said "I'd rather have a frontal lobotomy than a [James] Laube in front of me?" Graham, in 2002, when it seemed like many winemakers would forsake their personal winemaking styles for a 90-point Wine Spectator Score. And who built not one but several successful wine brands out of grapes previously unknown to American consumers such as Muscat, Malvasia, Mourvedre and Carignane when most wineries were planting more Chardonnay and Cabernet?

You get the picture. He's a daring visionary and experimentalist in an industry that tends to avoid risk.

"I've done some nutty things in my career and not all ended well. I don't know how I'll fare at the sanity trial when that day comes, but it's been a nice ride," he said with a distinct seriousness during an interview in the Bonny Doon tasting room recently.

But Graham, now 58, clearly isn't afraid of his sanity trial. Nor of failure. If he was, he'd just retire now, instead of pushing forth on the most ambitious endeavor of his 30-year winemaking career: to create from seed a unique *vin de terroir*, the hallowed French term for a natural wine whose character comes principally from its place of origin, without much human intervention or modern winemaking manipulation.

If you read the standard prose on winery websites and labels, you might think that all wines are *vins de terroir*. But Graham sees the opposite as being true. Aside from Ridge Montebello from the Santa Cruz Mountains and a few other exceptions, he views 99.98% of American wines as being to some degree "*vins d'effort*," or wines that are marked significantly by human efforts, often including smart sci-

Randall Graham at his San Juan Bautista ranch. From left, weeding the new vineyard, seedlings to be planted and a handful of biochar.



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ence and vineyard practices that deliver profound consistency and generally pleasing flavors at reasonable prices.

Californian wineries are the masters of *vins d’effort*, according to Grahm. And this is a good thing: Your next \$35 bottle of California wine will probably be technically sound, broadly appealing and rank well on the critics’ 100-point scales. It might be delicious. But for Grahm, the downside of technical perfection and consistency is that it comes at the cost of originality. It’s possible that a Chardonnay made in California



could taste very similar to one made in Eastern Washington or even Australia.

Today, Graham would rather make a natural wine such as Coenobium, a quirky white wine made by Trappist nuns in Italy, which “tastes like nothing else you’ve had lately, or perhaps ever,” he said. He realizes that the American market opportunity is small for a wine like Coenobium. But he doesn’t care.

MAKING IT RIGHT —IN SAN JUAN BAUTISTA

Graham is first to admit that he played a significant role in popularizing *vins d’effort* over the past 30 years in the United States. All of his previous wines to some extent fall into this category, which is something that gives him great pause when he thinks about his legacy as a winemaker. “I don’t regret making any of these wines. I just wish that I didn’t make them for so long.”

Several years ago, he decided enough was enough. He needed to push his portfolio toward the other side of the winemaking continuum towards *vins de terroir*: less like his mass-market Cardinal Zin, and more like his DEWN Bien Nacido Syrah. And after a bout with osteomyelitis and the birth of his daughter Amélie, he determined it was time to stop procrastinating on this dream project. So he sold off his Big House and Cardinal Zin brands and rolled that money into the purchase of a 280-acre site in San Juan Bautista.

Why San Juan Bautista? “This region is my power center, and the only one that I really know,” said Graham, a long-time Santa Cruz resident. “I started my winemaking career driving up and down Highway 156 every day when I was borrowing space at Calera.” And on a more supernatural note, Graham admits that he first saw the parcel in a dream. When he visited it two months later with a real estate broker, his intuition went crazy, and he did the deal.

A SIDE BET ON BIOCHAR

Like every plot of land, the San Juan Bautista site has its challenges, which only become greater with the method of farming Graham intends. The vineyard doesn’t get enough rainfall to support dry farming practices, which produce more *terroir*-driven wines. So Graham is plowing into the soil biochar, a form of highly porous charcoal that increases water retention by as much as 30% and promotes beneficial microflora and soil fertility. Its production (by heating biological matter in the absence of oxygen) helps offset global warming by capturing carbon in a stable, solid form; putting it in the ground can sequester the carbon for thousands of years.

Graham discovered biochar when he learned about an experimental vineyard project conducted by Hans-Peter Schmidt in Switzerland. It showed significant differences between the biochar-enhanced vines and their experimental control group—including greater vine growth, increased nitrogen content in vine leaves and much higher levels of amino acids in grapes. The latter finding is especially exciting to winemakers, as amino acids play an important role in the juice fermentation process and contribute to disease resistance in the plants.

Graham is likely the first American winemaker to use biochar. He hopes that it will not only inspire more sustainable farming practices

in the industry, but that it will prove to be a strong amplifier of flavor and of life force in wine grapes.

The wine is a long ways off, but this past summer Graham got his first indication of things to come when his employees began harvesting and cooking the broad array of vegetables and herbs that Bonny Doon has planted on the San Juan Bautista ranch.

“I’m definitely the boy who cried *terroir*,” Graham told assembled guests at one of his Cellar Door restaurant’s communal dinners in June, “but so far the produce is off-the-charts, ridiculously intense, minerally intense, it’s just super, super flavorful.”

Jarod Ottley, who as executive chef of the Cellar Door is used to cooking with fresh organic vegetables from area farms, agreed that the combination of organic, biodynamic, dry farming and biochar techniques on the ranch is yielding a more intense flavor than usual. Also, he noted that even the shelf life is enhanced: As an example, he said when some forgotten cherry tomatoes were discovered at the restaurant a week after they’d gone missing, they were still “just beautiful, vibrant and delicious.” And that is also great news for Graham’s project, as a resistance to oxidation is a characteristic that Graham is seeking to help his wine develop superior complexity.

DAUNTING ODDS

A far greater challenge than natural irrigation or the use of biochar is Graham’s plan to create a brand new grape variety itself, said Andy Walker, professor of oenology at UC Davis. “He’s hybridizing a grape variety from seed, which is rarely done in the wine industry, and nobody has made a commercial success of such an endeavor.”

Walker is assisting Graham with the varietal science aspects of the project. He is a huge advocate of creating unique varietals in the United States (his department brought us the Symphony grape in the 1990s), but said that the wine industry is averse to such practices. In addition, Graham’s attempt to create a new varietal is inherently more costly and risky. One of the only other winemakers attempting it in California today is Sashi Moorman of Stolpman Vineyards. He recently planted 7,000 seeds and said that they will likely give rise to 8–10 viable plants that end up producing good wine.

The sheer complexity of selecting and producing a viable varietal that grows well in the first place, let alone proves to be well matched to the climate and soil that it is raised in, creates a matrix of mind-boggling possibilities that may very well take a hundred years and tens of millions of dollars or more to find out. But Graham will rely on the success of approximation and pattern recognition to shorten that process as much as possible. And even if the time span is short, he admits that there will be no way to get a full return on his investment, even if he charged \$100 a bottle from the start.

“There’s a good chance I may not know if this is a success or failure before I die. Some scientists and wine critics believe it will never work,” said Graham. “But if I get this right, a wine will be produced that doesn’t taste anything like anything that ever existed before. And at the same time, it will be haunting and delicious and inspiring.”

NOT ABOUT SUCCESS, BUT LEGACY

More than 150 years ago, famed biologist Louis Pasteur said, “Chance favors only the prepared mind.” Daunting as the odds may seem for

THE CELLAR DOOR'S NEXT ACT

The Cellar Door is nothing if not an expression of the inspiration of Bonny Doon Vineyard founder Randall Graham, so it's no wonder that as Graham reinvents his winery, the restaurant is undergoing a transformation, too.

The Cellar Door was founded in 2009, with David Kinch, of the Michelin-starred Manresa consulting and Kinch's protégé, wunderkind Charlie Parker, in the role of executive chef. Parker left late last year to take over Plum in San Francisco, and the Cellar Door's new executive chef is Jarod Ottley, who was Parker's sous-chef and is something of a wunderkind himself.

"Maybe if anything it's slightly calmer, maybe a little more understated," Graham said of the restaurant and its food since Ottley took over, adding that he's very pleased with Ottley and how the restaurant is evolving.

Indeed, Ottley, who was born and raised in Toronto, can be as understated in demeanor as Graham can be expansive, but his food is inventive, beautiful and delicious, and there's no sign that he's missed a beat in taking over the kitchen.

"The restaurant has its own lifeblood," Ottley said. "There's a certain thing we do here. It's unadulterated, fresh and artistic."

Ottley graduated from the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco and before joining the Cellar Door, cooked at other such restaurants as 1300 on Fillmore in San Francisco, George in Toronto, and Santa Cruz's Pearl Alley Bistro. He spent more than a year as Parker's sous-chef before taking over Parker's mantle.

Just 23 years old, Ottley got his first professional cooking gig at 17, and his experience in the kitchen started much earlier, as his father was a chef in Toronto. "I kind of grew up in a lot of kitchens," Ottley said. "I have vivid memories of being kneehigh and watching my father cook."

In addition to Ottley's cooking, these days Graham is pleased with the Cellar Door's wine list, to which he is adding what he considers to be *vins de terroir* from around the world (previously the restaurant only sold Bonny Doon's own wines). He's also excited about the organic, biodynamic produce grown at Bonny Doon's new San Juan Bautista ranch (see related story, p. 44) that the restaurant is now serving and, most of all, Bonny Doon's Wednesday night communal dinners.

"It's sort of my little obsession, my little social experiment. I really want people to eat together if it kills them," Graham said. "We're, as a society, so private. As a result, I think there's a kind of social estrangement." Graham is serious about this: He charges an enticing mere \$25 for the elaborate prix-fixe, three-course dinner including a glass of wine on Wednesday nights. The night we were there he proudly held forth on the goings-on at the winery and its wine club. Once the amuse-bouche (burrata and deeply vivid and velvety pesto made from basil grown at the Bonny Doon ranch) and the next two courses were served, Ottley explained the history of sunchoke and the many steps (and nice wood-fired oven) it took to create the succulent and delicious entrée of glazed Arctic char with sunchoke and date purées.

We left happy, not only from a terrific meal, but from having made new friends with our tablemates.

The Cellar Door is located in the winery's tasting room at 328 Ingalls St., off the Swift Street Courtyard.

For more information, go to www.bonnydoonvineyard.com

See EMB website for a recipe from chef Ottley.



— Sarah Wood

Graham's *vin de terroir* project, Walker believes Graham is uniquely prepared to pull it off. And that's not only because of his ability to make great wine over three decades, but also because Graham is instinctively a great marketer.

"Let's just say that he comes up with the perfect new varietal in a short amount of time. The next hurdle is marketing this new wine in an industry that's resistant to change."

So which grape seed did Graham choose to start with? *Vitis berlandieri*, a native from the ditches of Texas. He likes its drought tolerance and ability to root deeper than any other grapevine known on earth, and because he believes its flavor characteristics can be bolstered by grafting onto it other varieties such as Grenache and Sagrantino. By the end of the year, he plans to have a total of 20 to 50 acres planted.

Whether Graham's project will succeed remains to be seen. But more important to him is taking the opportunity to try something

completely different and make a significant contribution to the future of the American wine industry.

"Who knows unless it's tried? You can potentially have 10,000 new varietals. If you have the wit, if you could discern a few that are special ... then you could really have something. And beyond wine—disease resistance and a higher life force, these are beautiful things."

While there are many wine industry professionals skeptical of the methods and near-term prospects of Graham's *vin de terroir* project itself, it seems there are few who aren't cheering him on. John Locke, wine director of Soif Wine Bar in Santa Cruz, hopes that Graham can produce a commercially viable wine that would fit on Soif's terroir-driven wine list someday. But more than that, Locke hopes that the project will succeed to the point where it becomes a significant part of Graham's legacy, and results in a potentially huge discovery that could change the wine world as we know it. 