

FoodWine Travel

A blog which will take you on an epicurean odyssey and show you the real life of a sommelier. My aim is to take you on a journey, to explore and discover culinary and vinous delights. Let me be your sensory tour guide, to whet your appetite, quench your thirst and encourage you to develop and enhance your own taste

- Robert Giorgione

Friday, June 25, 2010

Back in 1996, whilst working at Oxo Tower on London's South Bank, I was introduced to Randall Grahm and his amazing Bonny Doon Vineyards wines by the lovely people of Morris and Verdin. In fact, it was the very Jasper Morris MW and Sales Director Robert Wheatecroft, who inspired me to taste these quirky "Rhone Ranger" wines. Together with other Californian wines from their portfolio, such as the iconic Ridge Vineyards, Frog's Leap, Au Bon Climat and Qupe, the wines made by Randall Grahm soon became staples of my wine list and firm favourites amongst our clientele. For me, specifically with regards to the Bonny Doon wines, what was the most memorable thing were the funky labels, catchy names with literary connotations and references. The wines certainly had personality and focus, but were never meant to be serious. In particular, a stand out example I became very fond of was the Bonny Doon Carignan back in the late 1990's with its scratch off label - "The Ugly Duckling" to reveal a beautiful swan - of course all relating to the grape itself. For me, it made serving those wines and engaging with your guests much more fun and memorable.

Moreover, in the very same way we commonly use the term 'terroir' nowadays, those wines reflected Randall's true personality, philosophy, ethos and sense of tongue in cheek. With each wine, I sincerely believe you have really got the true meaning and encapsulation of 'a sense of place', yet using real imagination, creativity and a nod towards a particular part of France and those grape varieties from where they originate.

"Terroir is not a given. It's not obvious - it's a paradox."

- Randall Grahm

"Terroir is truly the most precious thing that wine possesses."

- Randall Grahm



Thus, as you can imagine, after being a fan of these wines for so long and have watched them develop over the years, tasted many of them, got to know and become familiar with them, I was extremely thrilled to have been

invited by the Fields Morris and Verdin team to attend a masterclass and tasting with Randall Grahm himself.

This spectacular event also co-incided with the "Celebration of the 25th Anniversary of Le Cigare Volant" - probably Randall's most famous wine. In addition, he was over in Europe to attend the Grenache Symposium in France and to promote his book "Been Doon So Long".

Randall's book was published by University of California Press and foreword written by Hugh Johnson - the first sentence reads: "Wine needs words. Without an accompanying script, it stands little chance of being noticed."

To quote award-winning wine writer and inspirational wine blogger Jamie Goode - "Randall Grahm is the Willy Wonka of the wine world, and Been Doon So Long is intelligent, insightful and mischevious. It's a work of genius."

Here are some highlights from the afternoon, some delicious quotes and 'vignettes' from the great man and my tasting notes.

After Randall made a wonderful introduction to how he got started, who and which circumstances inspired him along the way, and how the evolution of the vineyards and the wines had progressed over the years, we commenced by tasting a selection of the "Le Cigare Volant" wines.



"In 1954, the village council of Chateauneuf-du-Pape was quite perturbed and apprehensive that flying saucers of "flying cigars" might do damage to their vineyards were they to land therein. So, right-thinking men all, they passed an ordinance prohibiting

the landing of flying saucers of flying cigars in their vineyards. Further, any flying saucers or flying cigars that did land were to be taken immediately to the pound. The composition of our "Flying Cigar" is based on the traditional encephagement of Chateauneuf-du-Pape." - Randall Grahm.

"We've been making Le Cigare Volant since 1984, back when I thought it would be an interesting and fun thing to make a blend of the principal grape varieties of Chateauneuf-du-Pape, grown under Californian conditions. I didn't quite realize at the time that Cigare would become so synonymous with Bonny Doon and vice versa, nor that I would ultimately come to identify so strongly with the wine itself." - Randall Grahm.

Back in the 'early days', he went on to explain that he was drawn to this particular place (Gilroy) close to Santa Cruz because of its energy. It was almost in a similar fashion to the Chinese 'chi' (qi). The only people who showed any interest or enthusiasm for Rhone varietals then in California were Kermit Lynch and David Bruce. 1982 was the first year that Grenache had been harvested to go towards a Bonny Doon wine. The following year was the first for the Syrah to bear fruit. The most original and perhaps the most important 'linchpin' vineyard, which went on to form the backbone of many of Randall's wines ever since came from those in Gilroy. In 1984, which also saw the arrival of the Mourvedre grape, formed the 'holy trinity' of the Le Cigare Volant reds.

Subsequently, since its inception in 1984, Le Cigare Volant has contained many vineyard sources and a multitude of different blends of Rhone cepages. For many years, the Grenache from "Besson" and "Bertero" vineyards, both in Gilroy, have played a large part of the blend. In addition, up until the present day, a further nine Grenache vineyards have also been used at some stage or another. Possibly, the most 'consistently' used in most recent times have been "Alta Loma" and "Ca'del Solo, Soledad"

vineyards, both in Monterey. It is also worth noting that the first year that these vineyards became present in the red's core blend was the excellent 2003 vintage. If you have ever tasted a 2003 Le Cigare Volant or have a bottle or two in your cellar, take it from Randall it's one of his most highly-prized wines.

So, the Grenache possibly played the most important part of the wine's personality. However, the other grapes Syrah (sourced from 10 vineyards) and Mourvedre (sourced from 8 vineyards) added to the red wine's charming individuality and complexity. In addition, over the years, other grapes such as Cinsault (ever since 1992 from three vineyards), Carignan (since 2004), Charbono (only in the 1993), Viognier (only in the 2000) and Cunoise (only in the 2002) have been used.

Back in the 1980's and '90's, it became very fashionable, especially in California to experiment with white Rhone varietals. In particular, this was true of the perfumey and aromatic Viognier. In general, the wine consumer had developed a taste, well within their 'comfort zone' for big, powerful, primarily-oaked whites, such as Chardonnay.



But to keep things 'exciting' a 'counter culture' against the Chardonnay grape (Anything But Chardonnay) soon developed. These 'pioneering' Rhone specialists were led by the likes of Bob Linquist (Qupe),

John Alban and Randall himself, amongst a small group of others. In addition, it was also discovered that the location and micro-climates where these cepages did well were Contra Costa, Edna Valley, Santa Barbara and Paso Robles. Many winemakers imagined that Viognier would be the Vinous Great White Hope, but there are a lot of reasons why the grape has never fulfilled its promise. To do its best work, Viognier generally needs to be very ripe, and as a result turns out a wine heady in alcohol. This, of course, is wonderful as an aperitif, but too problematic to drink with an entire meal. Here steps in the wonderful Roussanne grape...

2007 Le Cigare Blanc - sourced from "Beeswax Vineyard" located in Arroyo Seco. 1st vintage was in 2003. Blend is normally two thirds Roussanne and one third Grenache Blanc. From time to time the percentages of the cepages will change. The wine displayed floral aromatics, lime blossom, citrus zest, grapefruit marmalade, quince, beeswax, with a long nutty finish balanced with good texture and fresh acidity. The addition of the Grenache Blanc in the blend shows that it is the natural and necessary ally to Roussanne. I pointed out that it would be best decanted when served, for instance in a restaurant or at home for a dinner party. Roussanne is a real 'gastronomy wine' and also has the ability for long ageing. On the other hand, most white Chateaufeuf's have a dollop of Marsanne instead. With



age, similarly to the Viognier, it develops a fat and oily richness. Next time you open up and taste a bottle, just spare a moment to have a think about it. Randall only used 1% Marsanne in the

2004 vintage of the Le Cigare Blanc and has decided never to use it since.

We progressed on with the 2008 Vin Gris de Cigare - Randall's first comment was that "The '09 will be different. More like a real Vin Gris". Anyway, the 08 was delicious and delicate. It had a beautiful salmon-pink colour and aromas of wild red fruits and a floral character. I have been a big fan of this style of wine for many years.



Especially in the summer, I always used to serve it by the glass, when I was working at Oxo Tower, Fifth Floor at Harvey Nichols and Orrery.

Next up was the 2005 Le Cigare Volant - Grenache has been restored to its rightful position as 'alpha grape' in the cuvee with 50%, with an enormously successful result. It was soft, earthy and displayed a wonderful forest fruit character, yet needed some time to breathe. Randall pointed out that his wines benefit from time. During the tasting, I kept on re-visiting my glasses to realise how they had opened up. Moreover, he made a few interesting remarks on how the effects of the screwcap closure seemed to close up the wine, so that they almost became 'backwards'.

We tasted a flight of a trio of different 'cuvées' of Le Cigare Volant. All three wines were from the 2007 vintage - (45% Grenache, 30% Syrah, 5% Mourvedre, 4% Cinsault)

"en foudre" - Large oak barrels that vary enormously in size but are significantly larger than the normal oak barrel used in Bordeaux or the piece used in Burgundy. They are widely used in the Rhône Valley.

Restrained, elegant, morello cherry with hints of chocolate. Supple savoury tannins.

"en demi muid" - 600 litre puncheons. More 'New World' sweet, ripe fruit, intense, textural and oak more pronounced.

"en bonne or normale" - Restrained and beautiful balanced blend of the two parcels. This is the wine which gets finally released onto the market.



Randall spoke about lees. He believes they can contribute a very lovely silky texture to the wine, as well as a certain savoriness, or umami - the mysterious 'fifth flavour'. When they are successfully mastered and seamlessly folded in, they can make a marvelous contribution, knitting the disparate parts of the wine together.

We did a similar vinous 'experiment' with the next flight of three reds, which consisted of 2008 - barrel samples (45% Grenache, 30% Syrah, 13% Mourvedre, 6% Cinsault, 5% Carignan)

"en foudre" - Savoury forest fruits and fresh cherry with a long, persistent finish



“en bonne 5 gall glass demijohns” - “Sleeping Beauty Protocol” n.b 3% additional lees which provide extra texture and complexity. Almost ‘bouillon-esque’ with notes of liquorice.

Many thanks to all concered, especially Damian Carrington and Lenka Sedlackova of Fields, Morris and Verdin and of course to Randall. The epicurean odyssey continues...

<http://robertfoodwinetravel.blogspot.com/2010/06/been-doon-so-long.html>

and then finally the 2005 “en demi muid” - Exotic, rich, intense with dark brambly, morello cherry fruit. Well-structured and has developed beautifully in bottle. Still needs time. The blend in the 2005 was 50% Grenache, 24% Mourvedre, 22% Syrah, 3% Carignan, 1% Cinsault.

I quizzed Randall on his thoughts of experimenting with other grape varities. He was interested in the potential of Petit Manseng. Of course, we are all familiar with the Italian varietal range of Ca’del Solo, which now includes Muscat and Albarino too. Who knows in which direction he will move next?

After the tasting we helped ourselves to a fabulous informal buffet lunch and had the opportunity to ask Randall questions. The wines which were served during lunch were - 2009 Ca’ del



Solo Albarino (the new release) a wine I used to serve by the glass at Orrery, as an alternative to the more ‘classic’ Rias Baixas Albarino. This wine is the product of the biodynamic Soledad vineyard. It was delicious, dry, pure and fragrant like a yuzu or feijoa fruit. The wine also displayed a touch of minerality and I would suggest a great wine to be enjoyed for the summertime, especially with seafood and salads.

Whilst tucking into the delicious food, we were served two vintages of “Le Pousseur” Syrah - 2007 and 2005. Both had quintessential Rhone-like peppery, black fruits and spice - almost like a Crozes-Hermitage.

With our chocolate brownies for dessert we enjoyed the 2007 “Vol des Anges” Roussanne (a late-harvest wine which means ‘the angels’ flight’). It was pure citrus-scented acacia honey with a hint of nuttiness. It came in a half bottle and again had the screw cap closure, which seemed to lock in the freshness and aromatics. This wine would be a wonderful discovery for any wine connoisseur who appreciates sweet wines.

“Been Doon So Long” is a highly entertaining journey to discover the truth of all things that may be found in the unlikely medium of a wineglass. In fact, right now I am relaxing and sipping on a glass of 2003 Le Cigare Volant, whilst enjoying reading it.

