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A French-style cider from Bonny Doon

Across the Table: Bonny Doon's Randall Graham bites into the cider trend, with a French twist.

By S. Irene Virbila
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Cider is having a moment. No longer a frumpy American Colonial beverage, it is becoming the surprise ingénue on the beverage scene.

Until recently, though, the only cider that ever caught my fancy was Eric Bordelet's profound and delicate cider made from heirloom varieties of apples or pears, especially his Poiré Granit from 300-year-old trees. The French ciders from this former sommelier are extraordinary — off-dry, wonderfully aromatic, slightly *pétillant* or bubbly with a complexity and finish that some Champagnes could envy.

It turns out Randall Graham, the genie and muse behind Bonny Doon Vineyard, the Santa Cruz estate he founded back in 1983, had the same experience when he tasted Bordelet's pear and apple ciders, and French-style cidre became a newfound passion.

Graham has been tremendously successful with Bonny Doon, but he's a restless, dynamically creative soul. And a few years ago, frustrated with the wine business, he was in search of a new project.

Enter cider.

Why not try making it? How hard could it be? Its history and tradition appealed to him. But also the fact that it's low in alcohol, fits in with the locavore movement and could be seen as a gluten-free alternative to beer.

When I tasted his French-style cider called, with his typical word play, *¿Querry?* (as opposed to perry, pear cider — or Winter Nélis Sparkling Perry in Graham's version), I was impressed. The Q stands for quince.

¿Querry? is dry and fine-textured, with a warm sweet perfume and the slight bitterness that quince brings. And it is just 6.9% alcohol, about half that of a typical wine. Every bit as pleasurable to drink as Bordelet's French ciders, it turns out this is only Graham's second production and the first year for quince. The first year (2010), he had to throw out the batch when the bottles exploded. "Definitely cider maker error involved," he recalls. "It was delicious, but the bottles were explosive!"

Graham says he was so enamored of Bordelet's ciders but realized he wouldn't be able to get the same sort of intensity with the varieties of pears we have in California. "The

solution is to blend in other fruits with more acidity and tannin to make a balanced cider. And I thought quince would give me the fragrance I was seeking and the astringency."

¿Querry?, in fact, is made with a whole rock band of fruit. Seckel and Bartlett pears. Pink Pearl, Macintosh, Pippin and crab apples (for astringency and acidity). Plus two kinds of quince. Because quince gives so little juice, he milled the fruit rather than pressing it and then filled giant tea bags with the pulp and suspended it in the fermenting pear and apple juice to infuse it with the fragrance of quince. The cider was fermented with indigenous yeast and then underwent a second fermentation in the bottle with cultured yeast.



As I'm writing this, he's pressing the fruit for this year's cider, which he's determined to make in a slightly less labor-intensive manner, the better to keep the price low. (A bottle sells for about \$14, another cider advantage.) He's been able to get some heirloom pears for this batch too, including Forrelle and Beurre Hardy.

Right now, he says, sommeliers are looking for interesting products from America. "A lot of people would love to serve American wines if they could find ones closer to their sensibility — elegant, refined and restrained in alcohol — and cider is just that."

Randall Graham's 2011 Bonny Doon Vineyard ciders, Winter Nélis Sparkling Perry and *¿Querry?*, cost about \$14 a bottle.

Available at Buzz Wine & Beer Shop in Los Angeles, (213) 622-2222, buzzwinebeershop.com; the Cheese Store of Beverly Hills, (310) 278-2855 and (800) 547-1515, John and Pete's Fine Wines & Spirits in West Hollywood, (310) 657-3080, Lincoln Fine Wines in Venice, (310) 392-7816; and the Oaks Gourmet Market in Los Angeles, (323) 871-8894. Restaurants that pour his ciders include Papilles in Hollywood.

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