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At Bonny Doon's Restaurant, Dinner With,
Oh, Yes, Wine

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RANDALL GRAHM made his name as the maker of respected mass-market wines, his Bonny Doon Vineyard producing as many as 450,000 cases a year. But lately he's become more of a boutique vintner, cutting his production to only about 35,000 cases, and focusing on more idiosyncratic wines.

He has also adopted a more personal touch at his tasting room here, opening a fine-dining restaurant, the Cellar Door Café, he said, "to get closer to customers by feeding them."



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Charlie Parker, the chef at Bonny Doon Vineyard's Cellar Door Café, with Kirstin Yogg and organic greens at Freewheelin' Farm, one of the farms that supply the restaurant.

At the urging of his nearby neighbor David Kinch, the chef and owner of Manresa, a Michelin two-star restaurant in Los Gatos, Mr. Graham hired Charlie Parker to run the café.

Mr. Parker, 27, could be mistaken for any of the ruddy-faced surfers who patrol the shore near Bonny Doon looking for waves. But for three years he was the demanding Mr. Kinch's sous-chef at Manresa, and he has been schooled at some of the best-known restaurants in the world.

Under him, the Cellar Door is doing well — fully booked on weekends and filling seats with a \$35 prix fixe menu five nights a week. But it still hasn't made a profit, heightening the tension between commerce and craft.

While Mr. Graham may now be eschewing the masses in his winemaking, he'd like more of them in his restaurant. Mr. Parker's cuisine, though, is not suited to turning tables.

"He's blessed, and he's cursed," Mr. Graham said of Mr. Parker. "He wants to see every plate. His challenge is, I'd like to see him delegate more so we can get the food out faster. He doesn't have to arrange every leaf of parsley."

His old friend thinks otherwise.

"It's his job to arrange every leaf of parsley," Mr. Kinch said of his protégé.

Besides, Mr. Parker said, "I'm very stubborn, and I have my own ideas."

Many of those ideas have been inspired by the hand-harvested aesthetic of Mr. Kinch, who grows acres of vegetables to use in his kitchen, unlike some other cooks who snip a few herbs from a small patch of plants for show. Manresa has become an incubator for a generation of California chefs in the farm-to-table set, including James Syhabout of Commis in Oakland, who was recently named best new chef by Food & Wine magazine, and Jeremy Fox, formerly of Ubuntu in Napa, where Mr. Parker worked as a sous-chef.

Like his mentors, Mr. Parker seeks intriguing and exquisitely fresh ingredients prepared with an apparent simplicity that is deceptively complex: roasted corn and watermelon salad with smoked goat cheese; whole fried rock cod over garden green risotto; and strawberry crisp with lemon verbena ice cream.

He said he does not create dishes to match Bonny Doon wines, but finds the right wine for whatever the abundant farms nearby offer that day.

Lindencroft Farm, one of the restaurant's biggest organic suppliers, is nestled in a grove of redwoods on a steep hillside in Ben Lomond, not far from Santa Cruz. Fingerling potatoes grow in mounds of straw, and asparagus fronds sway in the breeze.

Linda Butler started the one-acre farm in 2006 and delivers to Mr. Parker whatever is ripe on Wednesdays and Saturdays. On July 14, for example, diners ate her onions, turnips, Padrón peppers and mint and a variety of other herbs. A flat of her micro kohlrabi grows on a windowsill at the winery. "Linda dictates the menu," Mr. Parker said.

He, too, has his own, sometimes unusual, requests. While walking on the farm with him, Ms. Butler picked at a zucchini plant. "This is why I can't give you too many blossoms," she said, pointing at a circle of ants. He once asked Ms. Butler to grow celtuce, a vegetable that looks like a stemmed lettuce. It didn't come up. He also wanted scorzonera, a black root that tastes like artichoke. "That didn't work either," Ms. Butler said, laughing.

Born in nearby Menlo Park, Mr. Parker graduated in 2003 from the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco. Like any young chef, he has worked with a number of brilliant and temperamental bosses.

Mr. Kinch — who did his share of shouting, as Mr. Parker recalled — urged Mr. Parker to study in Europe at Noma in Copenhagen with René Redzepi, renowned for his creative use of the unusual plants he forages. Mr. Parker recounted a particularly fraught night when he was an intern there in early 2009 and someone, after other missteps, failed to properly cut the cauliflower.

“René kicked everyone out of the kitchen,” Mr. Parker recalled. As they stood outside, freezing, Mr. Redzepi barked at his team members before ordering everyone back inside.

Still, that was more successful than his 2006 internship at the Fat Duck, outside London. When customs agents found cookbooks and knives in Mr. Parker’s bags after his arrival at Heathrow Airport, he said, they deported him, thinking that Mr. Parker was trying to get a job illegally.

And while Mr. Parker’s relationship with Mr. Graham is respectful, even friendly, the tension between owner and cook is, at times, palpable.

That’s particularly so given the social agenda Mr. Graham has been pushing since the restaurant opened: communal dining.

“Eating is a sacrament and should be shared,” Mr. Graham said.

That doesn’t mean the food needs to literally be shared, Mr. Kinch and Mr. Parker argued. The idea of strangers eating off one another’s plates is, well, impractical. (Besides, it would be rather awkward on a first date.)

The three first discussed the idea in April 2009 when Mr. Kinch was consulting full time for Mr. Graham.

“Randall was talking about sharing a plate with random people, and this goes on for half an hour,” Mr. Parker said, recalling a meeting at the winery. Mr. Kinch and Mr. Parker sat in silence. “Finally, David opened up,” Mr. Parker said of Mr. Kinch. What if a stranger picked up a chop, took a bite and put it back on the plate for others to eat? Still, Mr. Graham persisted.

“You can’t say no to him,” Mr. Parker said. “It’s like talking to an over-intelligent 6-year-old. You have to really explain.”

Mr. Graham finally dropped the idea — sort of.



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Mr. Parker in the cafe.

“I hope we revisit it,” he said almost wistfully in an interview. “I think we can pull this off when we have the self-confidence to pull it off.”

When asked about Mr. Graham’s continued interest in communal dining, Mr. Kinch smiled while at the same time looking mildly annoyed.

“You can tell Randall I rolled my eyes,” he said.

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