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California growers find the right mix to match Rhône

By Dave DeSimone

Traditional Southern Rhône winegrowers toiling in torrid, rocky vineyards have for centuries understood the magic of blending. Combining primarily Grenache blanc, Roussanne and Marsanne grapes for whites and Grenache noir, syrah and mourvèdre for reds, they produce robust, yet beautifully balanced wines enhancing the pleasures of Mediterranean cuisine.

The best vigneron allow the Southern Rhône's distinctive terroir to speak through the wines. Pure fruit and exotic floral and herbal aromas jump from the glass uninhibited by the new oak aromas so common in popular "international" style wines.

Savvy California winegrowers have worked to emulate classic Southern Rhône blends without slavishly copying them. Like their French counterparts, California producers such as Bonny Doon Vineyards and Zaca Mesa Winery yearn to hear distinctive terroir sing through their wines' expressive, well-balanced fruitiness.

Since founding Bonny Doon Vineyard in 1983, winegrower Randall Grahm remains one of California's leading proponents of terroir-driven wines. His original dream of creating distinctive California pinot noirs realized only limited success. In 2006, he sold his catchy, commercially successful brands such as "Cardinal Zin" and "Big House Red."

Today Southern Rhône blends hold a special place in Grahm's winemaking heart. He believes such blends present California's best opportunities to create authentic wines fait fully expressing distinctive terroir traits.

For example, the **2007 Bonny Doon Vineyard, Le Cigare Blanc, Beeswax Vineyard, Arroyo Seco, California** (specialty 17964; \$21.99) relies on a classic blend of Roussanne (64 percent) and grenache blanc (36 percent) grown in the remote Beeswax Vineyard on California's Central Coast. The struggling vines find shelter from the Pacific Ocean's bone chilling breezes in the shadows of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Warm days with bountiful sunshine follow chilly nights allowing the grapes to ripen evenly. They retain bright acidity and refreshing mineral notes to balance opulent fruitiness.

Grahm's bio-dynamic farming foregoes chemical pesticides and fertilizers in favor of more natural practices. His hands-off, non-interventionist winemaking approach optimizes the grapes' intrinsic aromas and flavors.

Le Cigare Blanc succeeds admirably with a style recalling traditional Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blancs. The golden color exudes ripe pear aromas with lovely floral and brown spice nuances. Rich, mouth-filling pear and quince flavors balance deftly with bright acidity and mouthwatering mineral veins carrying through the long, dry finish.

Pair it with classic dishes, such as Loup de Mer au Fenouil (Sea Bass with Fennel cream sauce) and pan seared salmon with sea salt and black pepper. **Highly recommended.**