

THE 2010 FOOD ISSUE

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A TERROIRISTE'S PLOT: Vintner Randall Graham isn't joking this time **ALSO:** 70+ reviews

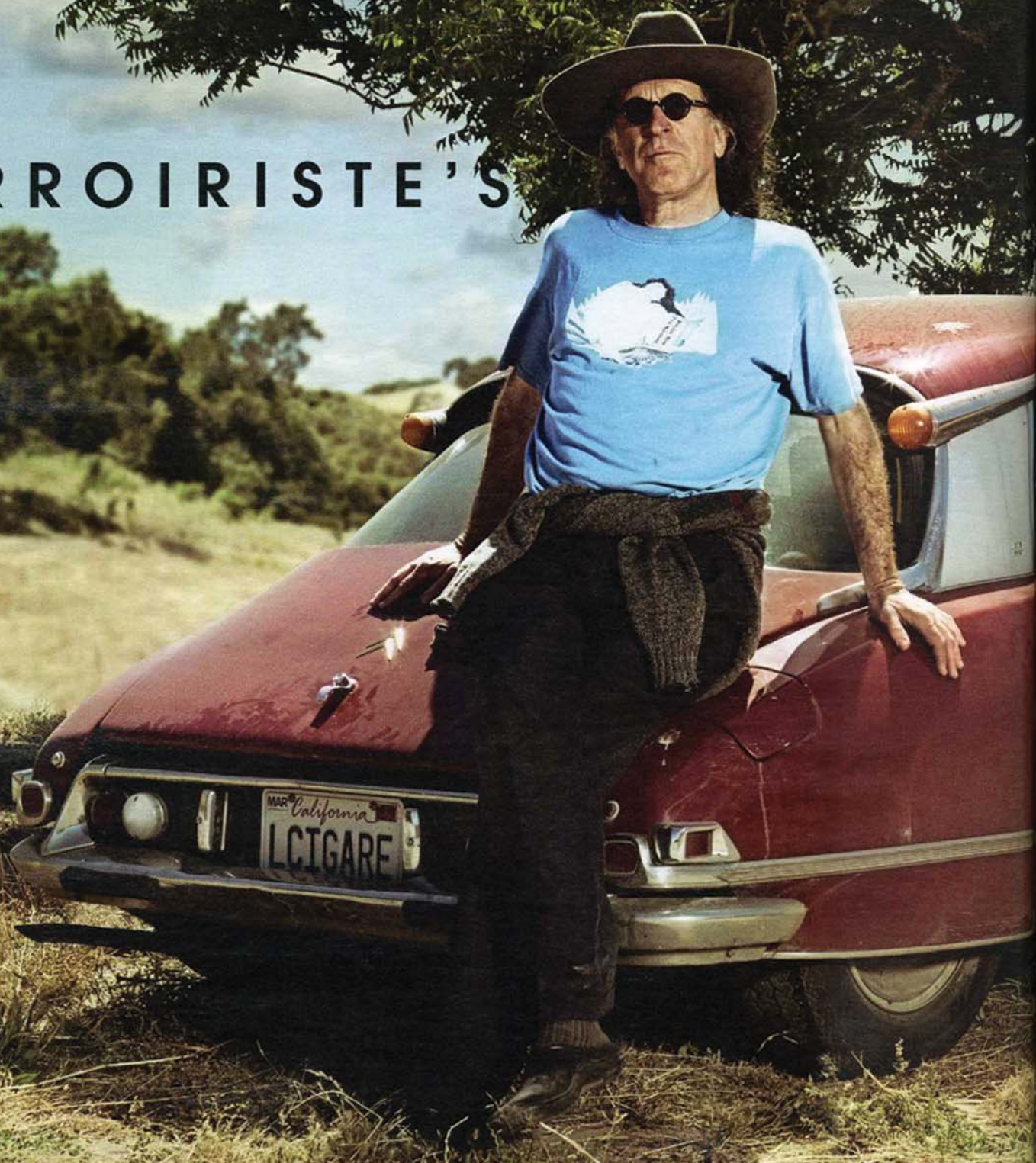
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Dishes like this one—beet soup with a purée of unripe pickled strawberries, garnished with young root vegetables and flowering herbs—put James Syhabout, of Commis, on cuisine's leading edge. SEE PAGE 60.

A
TERROIRISTE'S





Graham visits the site of his new vineyard in San Juan Bautista, where he hopes to produce a true terroir wine.

PLOT

FOR CLOSE TO THREE DECADES, BONNY DOON'S RANDALL GRAHM

HAS ENJOYED A REPUTATION AS THE P.T. BARNUM OF THE WINE WORLD.

NOW HE'S ABANDONING HIS SIDESHOW ANTICS IN A QUEST TO REDEEM

HIS PAST AND DISCOVER THE SOUL OF CALIFORNIA WINE.

BY JORDAN MACKAY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK HOLTHUSEN

R

ANDALL GRAHM

STANDS HIGH IN THE HILLS ABOVE SAN JUAN BAUTISTA, LOOKING NORTHEAST OUT OVER A FARMING VALLEY TO A DRAMATIC CRAGGY PEAK RISING FROM THE MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE.

"This is what I dreamt," he says, indicating the steep, north-facing incline covered with poison oak. "It was really just a mild recognition, but I remember the poison oak. And when I actually came here, I thought, 'Oh, yeah, I've seen this place before.'"

For a well-read, witty former philosophy major who often seems more at home with abstract concepts, Graham appears particularly energized to be standing among the gnarled oaks and flowering bushes. By his calculations, these hills absorb plenty of sunlight yet are still cooled by ocean breezes, and embedded in their soil are pockets of limestone, rarely found in California—ideal conditions for growing wine grapes. And it's here, among 280 acres of steep hills, powerful rocks, and dense scrub, that he intends to plant a vineyard dedicated to producing the wine world's holy grail, vin de terroir, a singular wine that is the ultimate expression of its place of origin.



Graham fell in love with pinot noir grapes at the start of his career, and they were the first grapes he planted in his new vineyard.

A QUICK GUIDE TO THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RANDALL GRAHM

(1975)



(1975) Introduced to fine wine while working at the Beverly Hills Wine Merchant. (1976) Tastes his first terroir wine, a great bordeaux: 1966 La Mission Haut-Brion. (1978) Enters UC Davis's winemaking school, having never visited a winery. (1981) Purchases a vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains locale known as Bonny Doon. (1985) Releases *Le Cigare Volant*. The

(2005)



name refers to a French ordinance prohibiting flying saucers from crossing over vineyards. (1990) Produces his last chardonnay and his first vintage of Big House Red. (1997) Uses a synthetic cork to stop a bottle of *Le Cigare Volant*. (2004) Diagnosed with osteomyelitis, a rare bone infection that leaves him in a halo for three months. / Produces the rock opera *Born to Rhône*,



FOR YEARS, GRAHM HAD SPOKEN AND WRITTEN ABOUT WINE'S TOPMOST

PLANES—PURITY, TERROIR, EXPRESSION—WHILE PUTTING OUT WINES THAT WERE

EVER MORE THE OPPOSITE: MANIPULATED, IMPURE, AND LOWBROW.

Appropriately enough, the winemaker is wearing a T-shirt with his own visage and the words "To make great wine, one must throw away the idea of making a profit." A self-described "bad businessman," Graham succeeded almost despite himself with the first incarnation of Bonny Doon, the vineyard he founded in 1981 and turned into a juggernaut. His new project clearly isn't motivated by money, either. Instead, he says, "the vineyard represents my spiritual path, perhaps the only shot I have at bringing balance into my life and achieving something like contentment."

The notion of a vineyard as a spiritual path may sound hokey to some, but Graham's high-drama framing of this ambitious project is appropriate. Nothing less than what Graham likely sees as his redemption is at stake. His career, while celebrated, has largely been perceived as a triumph of style over substance, of great marketing but mediocre wines. Graham's evident joy as he paces these hills suggests that he's game for the challenge. For his own sake, as well as for the future of California wine, I hope he succeeds.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2006, the biggest news in the wine world was the sale of the majority share of Bonny Doon Vineyards, the 27th-largest winery in the United States. At the time, it was pumping out more than 400,000 cases of wine a year. With the divestment, the Santa Cruz-based brand shrank by more than 90 percent, preserving only its smallest labels in its new form. Graham unloaded the ubiquitous Big House wines and the iconic Cardinal Zin, while holding on to Le Cigare Volant (a Rhône blend), Le Pousseur syrah, and a handful of other labels.

But more curious than the sale itself was the highly personal, almost confessional press release put out by Graham to explain it. "This sale allows us to return to our roots, as it were," he wrote, "and refocus on the production of unique and distinctive, biodynamically produced wines, ones that will truly express a sense of place. I have been raving on long enough about the transcendental value of terroir; it is now time to translate mere words into deeds."

Graham's announcement seemed like the sort of turn we don't often see in American life: the choice of art over commerce, quality over quantity. Yet it had always proved a bit hard to take the winemaker, whose own statement acknowledged a gap between rhetoric and action, at his word. For years, Graham had spoken and written high-mindedly about wine's topmost planes—purity, terroir, expression—while putting out wines that were ever more the opposite: manipulated, impure, and lowbrow. The contradiction taxed Graham's fans and evidently the man himself. So the big 2006 sell-off brought up the question: Was the dismantling of Bonny Doon Vineyards in the pursuit of terroir really a come-to-Jesus moment?

Four years after the sale, Graham is still enjoying the limelight. He was inducted into the Vintners Hall of Fame this year. *Been Doon*

performed by Teatro Zinanni. **(2005)** Shows up for San Francisco's massive annual Zinfandel Advocates & Producers (ZAP) tasting dressed as Cardinal Zin. **(2006)** Sells off a large share of Bonny Doon, reducing the quantity of wine produced by 90 percent. **(2009)** Buys 280 acres of vineyard land overlooking the town of San Juan Bautista. / Hosts a global wine-tasting via Skype on



The purchase of the new vineyard has given Graham a fresh focus and renewed energy to pursue his dream of finally producing a truly great wine.



So Long, his unexpectedly successful collection of both comic and serious writing, warranted a second print run and won this year's James Beard Award for best beverage book. Graham has almost 400,000 followers on Twitter—68 times that of Robert Parker, the nation's most famous wine writer. ("Twitter has just wrecked my life," says Graham. "It's a narcissist's dream come true.") The wine-maker seems to be almost constantly in the public eye, on radio, TV (including a appearance on *Oprah* in 2009), and in numerous articles and blogs.

Still, as he turns his attention to the pursuit of terroir, it's hard to avoid the image of Graham as a Don Quixote-like dreamer trying

desperately to join the philosophical level of his existence with an earthbound race against time. The general reaction of wine-industry types to Graham's quest is a slow shaking of the head, a grim smile, and a heartfelt "I wish him luck." Graham's peers regard him fondly, but he's also considered a bit daft.

LATE LAST SPRING, I WENT TO SEE GRAHM at Bonny Doon's bare-bones winery in Santa Cruz and at the site of his new vineyard in San Juan Bautista. On my first visit, I found him behind his desk in an office stacked with books, his hair pulled back in his signature ponytail. Behind a pair of equally well-known round wire-rimmed

GOT TERROIR?

GRAHM HOLDS UP PAUL DRAPER'S RIDGE MONTE BELLO CABERNET BLEND AS ONE CALIFORNIA WINE THAT EXPRESSES TRUE TERROIR. I ASKED OTHER WINEMAKERS FOR WINES THAT QUALIFY, AND THEIR VARIED ANSWERS CONFIRM THAT DEFINING TERROIR IS A WONDERFUL MYSTERY.

GREG BREWER
BREWER-CLIFTON

"The pinot noirs and chardonnays from our steep, 22-acre **Mount Carmel vineyard, in the Santa Rita Hills**, have a quality that never evolves much, no matter what kind of tweaking we do in the vineyard. It's a rich, oily, viscous wine, with almost a saltiness and a grip." **Taste it in:** Brewer-Clifton Mount Carmel pinot noir (2008) and Brewer-Clifton chardonnay (2008), Santa Rita Hills.

SCOTT SHAPLEY
ROESSLER CELLARS

"Wine from **Griffin's Lair Vineyard, in the Petaluma Gap** near San Pablo Bay, where wind and fog funnel in from the ocean and sweep toward San Pablo Bay, all have a savory, meaty flavor profile that I now just call 'Griffinsy' when making my notes. I make pinot noir from there, but I've tasted the same quality in syrahs from different wineries off the same vineyard." **Taste it in:** Roessler Griffin's Lair pinot noir (2008) and Wind Gap Griffin's Lair syrah (2007), Sonoma Coast.

MICHAEL TERRIEN
KAZMER & BLAISE CELLAR

The **Hanzell Vineyards, in the hills just north of Sonoma Plaza**. I remember chardonnays from 1991 and 1992 that showed winemaking in relation to the piece of ground, without the malo and the new oak barrels. That's terroir expression, where the winemaker does as little as possible to stamp the wine." **Taste it in:** Hanzell Vineyards Estate chardonnay, Sonoma Valley (2007).

JEFF STEWART
BUENA VISTA CARNEROS

"I think of **Savoy Vineyard, off Route 128 in Anderson Valley**. Rich Savoy is a great farmer, and year after year, the cabernets and pinot noirs show an incredibly intense purity of red fruits and spice, along with this robust, yet silky texture." **Taste it in:** Radio-Coteau Savoy pinot noir (2007), Anderson Valley.

ZACH RASMUSON
GOLDENEYE

"Our vineyard on the ridge among the redwoods **in the deep, cool end of Anderson Valley, which we call the Narrows**, always produces the same dusty, fine-structured tannins. Even in years when the vineyard fails to make truly ripe wines, they are uniquely the Narrows." **Taste it in:** Goldeneye the Narrows pinot noir (2007), Anderson Valley.

glasses, Graham's eyelids fluttered rapidly as he considered my questions. He looked tired and admitted, "I don't sleep much."

Mortality has been on the man's mind. He told me that winemakers typically have just 30 to 40 vintages to learn their craft. At age 57, Graham understands that he has a limited number left. Compounded by two other events—a serious bout with osteomyelitis, a rare bone infection, which left him in a halo for three months; and the birth of his daughter, Amélie, in 2003—this realization motivated Graham to contemplate not only his eventual end but also his purpose and his legacy, all of which ultimately led to his decision to downsize Bonny Doon in the pursuit of terroir.

"I am at this point of extreme radicalization," he said during our conversation at his office. "I feel that unless you can do something supremely different, don't even bother. Just give up." At that moment, Graham came across as sober, reflective, direct, and quietly desperate, like someone charged with an enormous, impossible task—securing Baghdad after an invasion, for example, or containing an undersea oil spill—with limited resources and a rapidly dwindling hourglass.

It's a far cry from the Graham you might have imagined during the heyday of Bonny Doon. Back then, it was easy to conflate the person with his daring, idiosyncratic brand: a larger-than-life character full of backslapping bluster and Dionysian excess. At a time when America's wine industry seemed painfully concerned with being taken seriously, Bonny Doon based the names of many of its wines on jokes. The grapes for Big House Red, one of Graham's most successful brands, came in part from a vineyard planted next to the penitentiary at Soledad, where vineyard workers could overhear the prison's PA announcements. The winery also staged off-the-wall, attention-getting events, such as a mock funeral for the cork when Graham switched over to screw caps. The winemaker produced a rock opera called *Born to Rhône*, featuring pop songs cleverly rewritten with references to Bonny Doon's wines and performed by the acrobats and minstrels of San Francisco's Teatro Zinzanni.

Surprisingly, Graham was not present at the opera's premiere; he was in the hospital awaiting surgery on his neck. In retrospect, his absence from the event seems somehow fitting, though he was terribly disappointed to miss it. While he took pleasure in these stunts ("They were enormous fun to conceive," he recalls), he was aware of their contribution to the widening gap between his image and his actual persona. Graham never seemed comfortable surrounded by crowds while donning the elaborate scarlet robes, complete with pope's hat and pastoral staff, that he wore in the guise of Cardinal Zin at San Francisco's massive annual Zinfandel Advocates & Producers (ZAP) tasting. "I had essentially zero interest in the [zinfandel] category," Graham writes in *Been Doon So Long*, noting that "these antics only further cemented the perception that I was but a wild and crazy showman."

Some friends and colleagues marvel that Graham, intellectual that he is, chose to become a winemaker at all. Aside from a flurry of activity for one month each year at harvest, the job mostly consists of moving wine from one container to another or simply leaving it alone. "Winemaking is essentially a boring enterprise. It's not going to provide the stimulation that Randall craves," says Patrick Comiskey, a senior editor of *Wine & Spirits Magazine*, who spent a lot of time with Graham while working on his forthcoming book about American Rhône-variety wines. "Randall's entire oeuvre is about transformation. And that is in itself odd, because winemakers need to be consistent. To his credit and his fault, Randall is anything but."

"RANDALL HAS MADE SOME VERY GOOD WINES, NO DOUBT," COMISKEY SAYS. "BUT

THEY HAVE BEEN FEW AND FAR BETWEEN. TRULY GREAT, MEMORABLE WINES?

"I'M NOT SURE THAT EVEN HE WOULD SAY HE'S REALLY DONE THAT."

Bonny Doon Vineyard's mission was always hard to pin down: pinot and Rhône-variety producer, purveyor of comedy and satire, importer of obscure European vintages. But this multifaceted history comes directly from Graham's buzzing intelligence. "Randall's an incredible visionary and very creative, but it's the details—as is true for many of us—that are hard for him," says Burke Owens, who served as Bonny Doon's director of marketing and communications for three years after the sale. "He's not a hands-on entrepreneur in the mold of, say, Steve Jobs or Jess Jackson, someone who assigns duties and then follows through. He paints a very rich picture of where he wants to go, but he'll often retreat at that point, and it can be difficult to figure out how to achieve those goals."

Graham pursued winemaking almost as an afterthought, perhaps out of desperation. He came close to finishing his degree at UC Santa Cruz in the early 1970s before returning to his native Los Angeles, where he was introduced to fine wine while working at the Beverly Hills Wine Merchant. After a year of retail sales, he drifted for a while, unable to find his calling. Describing himself as "socially retarded" in those days, Graham makes an apt comparison to the character of Miles in

Sideways. "I was an insufferable geek back then, borderline Asperger's when it came to wine. It was the only real connection I had with the rest of the universe." Learning to make wine might prove therapeutic and could help him cultivate some of the cruder aspects of his personality, Graham decided, so he applied to UC Davis's winemaking school. "This was essentially a complete leap of faith," he says. "I'd never even visited a winery. I'd never made wine. I just simply decided I was going to be a friggin' winemaker." His newfound direction didn't exactly cure him of his geekiness, though: He often wore a tie to pruning classes in the vineyards.

Graham's first pursuit after he graduated from Davis was the great grape of Burgundy, where the notion of terroir was first formally articulated. "At that time, Randall was looking for the ideal place to plant pinot noir," recalls John Tilson, founder of the *Underground Wine Letter* and an old friend of Graham's. "Randall and I shared a passion for pinot noir way before anyone knew what it was. He was absolutely intent on making the greatest pinot noir outside of Burgundy." Graham ultimately settled on a vineyard, which he purchased with help from his family, in a Santa Cruz Mountains locale known as Bonny Doon—and thus his winemaking odyssey began. But he quickly found that he couldn't produce a pinot noir of the style or quality worthy of his Burgundian dreams, so he grafted the vines over to syrah, started his adventure with Rhône varieties, and launched the Bonny Doon we all came to recognize.

Despite Graham's dilettantish approach, Bonny Doon's unpredictable menagerie of wines, writings, and labels are part of its charm and one of its legacies. While Comiskey worked on his book, he says, "I looked around for anyone using humor of any kind in the wine industry, from labels to elsewhere, and I couldn't really find

any.... The whole notion that wine could be something you could have fun with or play with, Randall's the one who seized upon that. I stop short of saying he invented it, but he is the guy that made it a possibility. And that's kind of earth shattering." However, Graham never intended to focus on making the world safe for wine humor. In the end, that may have distracted him from his real mission of making great wine, which some critics question whether he has ever really achieved. "Randall has made some very good wines, no doubt," Comiskey says, "but they have been few and far between. Truly great, memorable wines? I'm not sure that even he would say he's really done that."

Graham makes an interesting contrast with Paul Draper, the winemaker at Ridge Vineyards, who has an estate located 23 miles, as the crow flies, from Bonny Doon in the Santa Cruz Mountains. They shared a college major (Draper studied philosophy at Stanford), and both are hyperintellectuals who take immense pleasure in analyzing the complexities of wine. But Graham excelled at jumping from project to project while building big brands, whereas Draper found success by remaining relatively small and doing little to no marketing for his great wines. In Isaiah Berlin's famous formulation ("The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing"), you can guess which of the two men is the fox.

Graham respects Draper enormously for discovering the exact thing that has eluded him: California terroir. "It's incredible what they found up there at Monte Bello," he says. "A true terroir wine—and Draper has been masterful in expressing it." But Graham appears to have found his own inner hedgehog at last, thanks to his obsession with unearthing terroir for himself, along with a newfound willingness to do whatever it takes to make that happen.

Graham's effort also thrusts him symbolically into a debate raging within California's winemaking community: whether the state's most celebrated wines will continue to be conceived and fabricated as commercial products intended to appeal to consumers and critics (known in the industry as vins d'effort), or if they are best thought of as unique agricultural products, coaxed into being to bear a distinctive, unmistakable stamp of natural identity (vins de terroir). Finding and expressing terroir is not the goal of most California winemakers—nor was it for Graham, who relied on technological tools such as dealcoholization, enzymes, and micro-oxygenation to compensate for imbalances in grapes that, at their worst, came from vineyards planted for convenience over quality, or, at best, didn't have the benefit of generations of maturation and fine-tuning. Technological intervention is also the path to producing wines that are magically ready to drink when they're released, rather than requiring years to evolve.

Having flourished as a commercial winemaker and having found the success unfulfilling, Graham has now thrown himself to the other side, where a handful of winemakers are trying to carve out a new future for California wine, one that could change the way the wines taste and the way they're perceived. These winemakers want to find the quality that the brilliant wine writer Matt Kramer calls "somewhereness." Rather than make wine that tastes like it could come from anywhere, they strive to produce vintages that clearly come from someplace very specific.

The notion of terroir in California lies somewhat in the eye of the beholder. Many winemakers will truthfully say that their vineyards display a signature; at one level, it's fair to say that this is an expression of terroir. On the other hand, for the French, as for Graham, there is terroir and there is *terroir*, and wondrous wine



from epic terroir is rare indeed. California no doubt has terroir, but it's unusual for winemakers here to take the extreme measures that winemakers in France have relied on for centuries to express it.

When I ask Graham how to recognize terroir, he references Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart's definition of pornography: "You know it, in this instance, when you taste it." To Graham's mind, terroir has two particularly noteworthy aspects: first, "a much greater sense of order and depth to the wine than one would typically encounter in a vin d'effort"; second, "often, a pronounced mineral character to the wine." There are those who say, however, that minerality is a quality as ephemeral as terroir itself.

Graham recalls his first taste of terroir wine, a bordeaux from the commune of Graves, back in his 20s, when he was still selling wine in Beverly Hills: "The one that first drove the phenomenon of terroir home for me was a 1966 La Mission Haut-Brion, with its intense iodine element and great persistence of flavor. Indeed, tasting a number of wines from Graves and finding a similar soil characteristic in all of them made this idea very real." But recognizing most terroir wines tends to require a trained palate. "In candor, I don't think an untutored wine taster would recognize a vin de terroir as such," Graham says. "Further, I don't think that untutored tasters particularly appreciate vins de terroir—they can seem too hard and unyielding. Simple, accessible fruit bombs are generally more easily appreciated by the novice."

As Graham notes, fruit is the first thing most drinkers seek in wine, then the sweet taste of oak. America's—and, more important, America's wine critics'—predilection for these flavors has created the world's dominant mode of wine, often known simply as the "international style." Rather than highlight the differences between places, this style aims to blur them with fruit and oak into some likable, easily understood notion of wine.

In Graham's mind, unearthing the music of terroir through the instrument of the grapevine requires both extraordinary land and extraordinary cultivation: "One has to have a great and distinctive terroir to amplify, and that's not always obvious." The point is for the winegrower to stay out of the way for decades, if not for generations,

OPPOSITE: Graham amidst the pinor noir vines at Bonny Doon's estate vineyard, 1982.

and let the vine, the soil, and the natural processes that turn grapes into wine work their magic.

IN ADDITION TO APPEARING IN HIS DREAM, the new vineyard is a bit of a homecoming for Graham. In his early days, he rented space at Calera winery, 16 miles down the road. The drive to his new vineyard is the same one he made every day 30 years ago—and the first vines he planted on the San Juan Bautista site, just half an acre's worth, are pinot noir, his first love.

But Graham plans to focus here on grenache, the predominant grape in his flagship wine, *Le Cigare Volant*, now in its 25th vintage (the license plate on his classic red Citroën reads "LCIGARE"). It's a variety he's been working with for decades and believes might be "one of the few grapes that we can do in California better than almost anywhere else in the world."

Graham is betting that the San Juan Bautista site will recapture some of that mojo and more. Its sunbaked hills, he believes, receive enough ocean breeze to allow the fruit to ripen at a low sugar level. Low sugar is directly related to low alcohol levels, key for expressing terroir. The limestone outcroppings can be transformative for grapevines, producing wines with an unmistakable flavor and texture.

The measures to which Graham will go to achieve terroir are considered extreme in the state. He intends to plant a large variety of clones and vine cuttings on their own roots, not grafted onto phylloxera-resistant rootstock, as most vines in the world now are (orthodox terroirists believe that rootstock is a mediator that can inhibit terroir.)

But perhaps the most "utterly mad" (his words) aspect of Graham's bold experiment is his plan to grow a portion of his grapes from seed. Most vineyards are planted with vine cuttings, exact genetic reproductions of existing vines, so the vineyard owners know precisely what they'll get. Genetically unstable, the grape seed is the unknown element, so planting it becomes a sort of Russian roulette. Graham intends to collect seeds from varieties he's planted and let them germinate. The resulting vines could produce red, pink, or white grapes. He can then select and propagate ones that best suit his purpose.

Wines made from a variety of genetically distinctive material will be more interesting and complex, Graham believes. Moreover, vines are more likely to form a deep-shooting taproot, which may help them collect minerals and achieve an overarching, drought-resistant hardiness that allows for dry farming and amplifies terroir. Notably, growing grapes from seed will result in new varieties that represent the relationship between the grapevine and the site in an original way.

Sashi Moorman, a Lompoc vintner who produces such respected brands as Stolpman and Evening Land, planted a vineyard from seed in 2007. His experiment has yet to yield grapes, and he is aware of the long odds. "From the 7,000 seeds we planted, we may only get 8 to 10 plants that will produce good wine," he says. "But they'll be our unique plants and will have originated from our soil." Moorman also makes the point that planting from seeds and letting nature come up with the code is the only way to find a vine that could resist phylloxera, allowing winemakers to plant vines on their own, original roots—another factor Graham considers important for terroir.

But Moorman isn't sure that Graham understands the enormity of the challenge: "Whenever you get involved in plant genetics, the instances of success are very few," he said. "You can't just cross-plant and come up with the new golden delicious apple. You get a lot of

stuff that's useful to the plant, but not much for the gastronome. Randall has a long road before him."

ON THE OTHER HAND, Graham might just strike gold. His seedling vineyard, likely at least a year away from planting, is not the greatest thrust of his new plans; grenache is. He expects to plant that vineyard this winter, on dozens of hilltop acres cleared this past spring by a troupe of goats. Not that grenache marks a clear path to commercial gain: The grape doesn't even count among the nation's 10 most popular red varieties. Yet Graham believes it can make truly brilliant wine in California, and there's always a market for that. And anyway, as his T-shirt proclaims, Graham doesn't define success in terms of money.

"In a perfect world, I'd be in the vineyard every day, thinking about grapes, thinking about wine, and not doing anything else," he says. Given the slow-moving nature of winemaking and the insatiable playfulness of Graham's mind, I have to wonder if he isn't just making excuses. But having seen how vigorous he seems while walking in his vineyard—and the sallow, wan look he assumes when he's working in his office—I take him at his word.

"The problem, of course, is that I'd have no money, and I'd have no wherewithal to do this," Graham continues. "Which means that, unfortunately, I have to devote a lot of time to selling wine, to promoting wine, to sales calls and doing wine dinners." So, onward with Graham's tweeting and traveling, his determined typing in hotels and on planes, as he attempts to steer his company toward a new ethos.

If the production of true terroir wines in California will ever be anything but an anomaly, people of Graham's stature, knowledge, and resources will have to take these kinds of risks. In the end, his vineyard may be a bust; his seeds may never bear fruit or show any expression of terroir. This project could cost Graham his business and what's left of his fortune. "Not only do I have to figure out how to make these great new wines," he concedes, "but I have to find people who will actually appreciate them while not turning off my old customers, or at least gradually bringing them along." Indeed, the project could eventually drive him mad. But if he can stay true to his vision in creating this vineyard, Graham will do something of lasting importance, not just for his own legacy but for the future of California wine.

For now, the necessary evil of business seems more bearable to Graham, thanks to a certain vineyard in the hills above San Juan Bautista. "On some level, I have a little pride in what I've accomplished," he reflects. "But now it seems so beside the point. So I had a big business and sold a lot of wine, big deal. For me, it's about creating beauty. Not all of us can cure cancer or world hunger, but if we can bring some beauty into the world, that's exceptional." ■

JORDAN MACKAY IS SAN FRANCISCO'S WINE AND SPIRITS WRITER.