



SMOKE SIGNALS A selection of Bonny Doon wines displayed in a cigar box.

The Grape Nut

CALIFORNIA WINEMAKER RANDALL GRAHM HAS BEEN SHAKING UP THE DECIDEDLY SOBER WINE WORLD FOR YEARS NOW. JUST WAIT TILL OENOPHILES TASTE WHAT HE'S UNCORKING NEXT. BY EDWARD LEWINE // PHOTOGRAPHS BY AYA BRACKETT

THE SERVERS sit in their aprons eating a staff dinner of fish fillets when the world's most unusual and entertaining winemaker gets up to speak. It's a hot Saturday afternoon in New York City, and Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyard has come to the clubby confines of Morton's Steakhouse to

tout the virtues of his signature wine, Le Cigare Volant (The Flying Cigar), a California version of the Southern French wine Chateaneuf-du-Pape.

The staff applauds. Graham, 57, is arguably a more engaging dinner guest than they're used to. Looking a bit like

John Lennon, with a graying ponytail and spectacles, he talks like a semiotics professor and writes like a Borscht Belt comedian. He's in New York this afternoon because his book, *Been Doon So Long: A Randall Graham Vinthology*, is up for the 2010 James Beard Award for beverage writing.

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“The 2005 Cigare Volant wasn’t filtered before bottling,” Grahm tells the crowd, “and unfiltered wine has more life force. That can be a good thing or a bad thing, and the screw caps we use instead of corks amplify that tendency. Screw caps rock, for lack of a better term.”

It’s hard to say what the servers make of this dissertation, but then Grahm hasn’t gotten where he is by talking down to his audience. Under him, Bonny Doon has thrived, turning eccentricity and risk-taking into virtues, becoming successful by making and importing unusual wines from lesser-known grapes like Muscat and Albariño and selling them in surprisingly large quantities.

“He’s a mad scientist,” says Jerold O’Brien of Silver Mountain Vineyards. Or, as famed wine importer Kermit Lynch puts it, “He’s like a cross between Karl Marx and Groucho Marx.”

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By 2006, Bonny Doon was one of the 30 biggest wineries in the U.S., selling some 450,000 cases and grossing tens of millions of dollars a year. So what did Grahm do? He sold off most of his empire to finance his most bizarre experiment yet: a vineyard where he’ll grow grape hybrids of his own design.

Although he’s never been a darling of wine critics (not an especially radical bunch), it is agreed across the board that he’s a talented winemaker. And just as important, he’s an ingenious marketer. He favors hilarious names for his wines (Critique of Pure Riesling) and Monty Pythonesque label artwork, and every wine he makes has a story behind it. He’s also a relentlessly witty writer,

emailing his periodic *Noose Letters* to some 30,000 eager fans.

Last year Grahm bought a 280-acre plot in San Juan Bautista County. There, he plans to grow various grape varieties and interbreed them, creating unique mixtures—and flatly rejecting what is common practice for the overwhelming majority of winemakers worldwide, who work with recognizable grape varieties. That, after all, is what tends to sell.

“The theory of this project is not to discover the best Grenache or Mourvedre grapes,” Grahm tells me enthusiastically, “but rather to create a population of genetically distinctive individuals and a wine that is truly complex.”

Grahm grew up in Los Angeles, becoming a grape fanatic while studying philosophy at U.C. Santa Cruz in the mid-1970s. After a stint at U.C. Davis Department of Viticulture and Enology, his folks helped him buy a vineyard in Bonny Doon, a funky hamlet in the Santa Cruz mountains.

The original dream was to make a great California Pinot Noir, expressive of the local *terroir*, i.e., the singular taste imparted to grapes by the specific place they were grown. Pinot noir, the famous grape of Burgundy, produces sublime red wines but is tough to cultivate. Grahm’s plan was to create pinots that taste as if they came from Bonny Doon and nowhere else.

He soon discovered, however, that his hot California vineyard was no place for the cool-air-loving Pinot, but ideal for the grapes grown in Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape, in France’s Southern Rhone region. The first vintage of Bonny Doon wines was bottled in 1983; for the next 30 years, while most of Cali churned out cookie-cutter Cabs and Chards, Grahm became one of a small vanguard of American vintners producing wines from Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre.



FRUIT OF THE VINE The tasting room; 2008 Le Cigare Volante aging in special oxygen-exclusionary bottles

Driven by his eclectic energy, Grahm gradually abandoned the “simple life.” The Bonny Doon brand came to comprise a line of wines for cognoscenti (Le Cigare Volant), an array of mass-market wines (Big House Red, Cardinal Zin), a company devoted to Pacific Northwest Rieslings, a wine importing business, a mail-order wine club that produces 12 new and different wines a year, and a hip Santa Cruz café.

“It happened one step at a time,” Grahm says. “One day I discovered I was in charge of an organization that was so convoluted and Borgesian in its complexity that it was beyond out-of-control.”

Still, had he produced any truly distinctive wine? That was the question he began to ask himself in earnest as he turned 50, saw the birth of his first child and suffered through a frightening, near-fatal bone infection.

The answer was no. “I have made some nice wines,” he allows, “and

entertained a lot of people, but I don’t think I have made a deep contribution yet.”

So he sold off two high-volume brands and spun off his Riesling brand into its own business. Then he took a gamble on his plan to create a vineyard of hybrids straight out of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.

He’s not the only one making hybrid grapes. South African Pinotage, for example, is a mix of Pinot Noir and Cinsault. But no one is setting out to create grapes of mixed parentage unique to a given vineyard. “There will be nothing like it,” Grahm says.

Some say that’s the problem. *Terroir* is based on comparing known quantities: apples to apples. Pinot noir planted in one part of Burgundy may taste different than that from

another part. But while wine made from a vineyard of Randall Grahm’s hybrids will have a distinctive taste, it will be less an expression of land than of Grahm’s experimentation. No matter what, it won’t be boring.

After a half-hour spent conversing with the waiters at Morton’s, Grahm stands up to leave. He has a dinner date with Eric Asimov, the wine writer for *The New York Times*, and Adam Gopnik of the *New Yorker*. The following day is the James Beard Awards dinner, where Grahm’s book will win.

“I wish I could tell you why I bought this land,” says Grahm, whose new wines won’t be ready for another five years. “Based on my intuition I think this will be great. Until I do it, I won’t know.”

EDWARD LEWINE, a regular contributor to The New York Times Magazine, recently passed part one of the Master Sommelier’s Exam. The easy part.

TOASTMASTER Bonny Doon vintner Randall Grahm

