

You may have noticed that this is not a list of the most “powerful” or “influential” people in the wine business. There have been plenty of those lists over the years, and we didn’t feel we needed to reinvent that wheel. Instead, we thought it would be interesting to take a subtly different approach and ask: Who are the industry’s most admired people?

The word “admire,” according to the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means to feel respect or approval for someone or something. Despite this seemingly clear definition, admiration is a tricky thing to pin down. While we often admire successful people, those we admire most aren’t always the ones at the top of the heap. Sometimes we admire a person for his or her tenacity, or principles, or humanity. Admiration cannot be measured in the number of cases sold, or profits made.

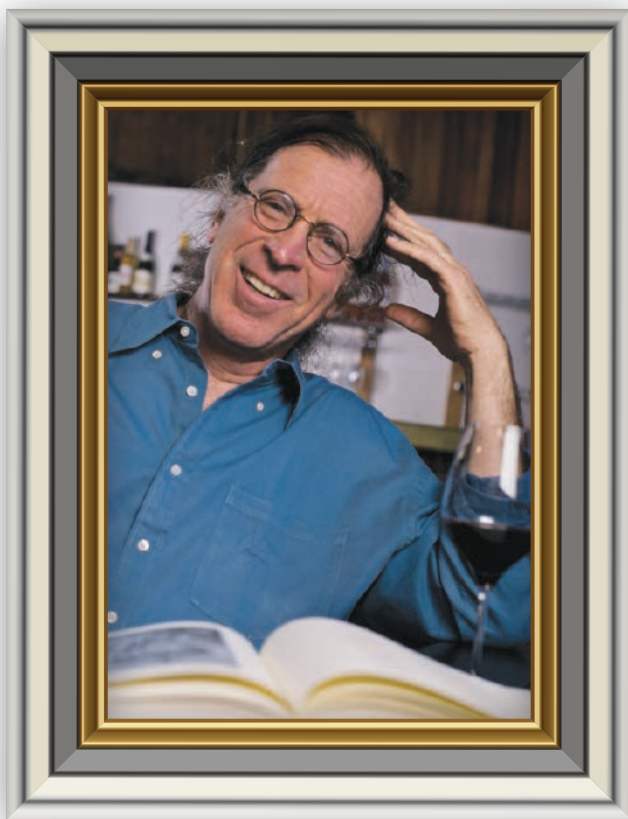
To help compile our list we solicited the input of a judging panel consisting of winemakers, grapegrowers, wine writers, educators, buyers, sommeliers and

consultants throughout North America – an admirable group in itself – and asked panelists for nominations, not only within their own professional categories, but also beyond. The only rules were that the nominees must be living, and based in North America. The resulting list of nearly 200 nominees was narrowed down to 50 finalists, based on the number of nominations they received, and submitted to the panel for voting. Panelists could vote for as many nominees as they liked.

When the final votes were tallied, the results revealed a fascinating variety of award-winners – diverse in their backgrounds and accomplishments, but all worthy of recognition. You’ll see many names you recognize among the profiles that follow, but it’s just as likely that you’ll come across a few you’ve never heard of.

Because the race was such a close one, no single person received significantly more votes than the others. Therefore, we chose not to rank the winners, but to present them as equals, in alphabetical order.

Photo: Alex Krause



RANDALL GRAHM

Founder, Bonny Doon Vineyard

Randall Graham has been called many things during his 30-plus years in the wine business: philosopher; court jester; eccentric; visionary. But one thing he's never been called is predictable.

Graham studied philosophy and English at the University of California at Santa Cruz, then took a low-level job at a Beverly Hills wine retailer. As he moved up the ranks, he discovered a passion for wine that led him to earn a degree in plant sciences from UC Davis.

After graduation, with his family's help, he bought land in the Santa Cruz Mountains and founded Bonny Doon Vineyard in 1983. When his plan to produce

the Great American Pinot Noir fizzled, Graham channeled his winemaking zeal into Rhône varieties and through wines such as Le Cigare Volant, became known as California's original Rhone Ranger.

In the late '80s, Graham turned his attention toward Italian varieties, planting the Ca' del Solo vineyard in Monterey County, and in 1992 he launched the Pacific Rim Riesling brand that he later spun off into a riesling-only winery in Washington state.

Whatever he chose to make, Graham's whimsical labels, pun-filled wine names and clever publicity tactics – including a theatrical funeral for cork when Bonny Doon made the switch to screwcaps – earned him a reputation as a brilliant marketer and industry iconoclast.

By 2006, Bonny Doon was selling more than 400,000 cases of wine a year. While many vintners would revel in that success, Graham decided to downsize. He sold brands such as Big House and Cardinal Zin, which were profitable, but – he realized – not distinctive or reflective of terroir. He dropped production to 25,000 cases and vowed to forego “winemaking tricks” to produce more natural, original wines.

He also got back into grapegrowing – Graham's original estate vineyard succumbed to Pierce's disease in 1994 – and embraced Biodynamics and dry farming. In 2010 he purchased a 280-acre property in San Juan Bautista, in San Benito County, and planted 80 acres of grape vines, with one plot planted from seeds.

“I look to Randall to challenge my notions of winemaking and California wine styles,” said wine educator and consultant Doug Frost MW, MS. “Every time I speak with him I know that I will be a bit bewildered, but even more, I'll be excited to figure out just what I can learn from his constantly inquisitive mind. He has had an outsized impact upon the world of wine, certainly in America.”