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## BONNY DOON VINEYARD: SYRAH IS NOT DEAD, AND OTHER MATTERS

There's just something about Randall Grahm that demands only the use of adjectives pulled off of a rack clearly bearing the label "erudite." The man isn't busy, he's peripatetic. He's not merely opinionated, he's irrepresible. More so than many winemakers, an afternoon's conversation with Grahm seems likely to range deep and wide across philosophic, economic, political, literary, and scientific domains. And that's before you even start talking about the wine.

"I can't be consistent, I can't stay on message. How boring is that? I try to be a little more focused but...." Grahm trails off with a smile.

Grahm is the founder, owner, and seemingly inexhaustible pilot light of Bonny Doon Vineyards, and one of California wine's elder statesman. While he might decry such a label, and could split hairs about his age (59 for the record, and still going strong), he'd be hard pressed to shrug off any anointment as one of the state's most important winemakers.

Grahm started Bonny Doon Vineyards in 1983 without much of a plan, other than to make wines that he enjoyed drinking, and for a while the wines produced under his label included Pinot Noir, Rhone varieties, and lesser known Italian varieties. But Grahm embraced each with a fervor that could border on frightening. The combination of that passion and Grahm's intuitive and almost preternatural gift for guerrilla marketing and branding took him from being a rich kid with an interest in wine to being one of California's most successful and admired winemakers.

From his pioneering advocacy of Rhone varieties (he has been called the original Rhone Ranger); to his early embrace of screwcaps; the fantastically clever wine brand names; and his use of artists like Ralph Steadman and Gary Taxali to create equally clever wine labels; and the recent move to complete transparency in ingredient and process labeling on all his wines; Grahm has always provoked equal parts envy, amazement, and head scratching among both his industry colleagues and customers. He is a true iconoclast.

Over 25 years, Bonny Doon Vineyards grew from a few hundred cases of wine to a production of about 450,000 cases each year. And then, at what might have seemed like the height of his success, Grahm decided he was headed in the wrong direction. A life-threatening illness and a young daughter brought him some perspective, he suggests.

Now, instead of 450,000 cases, he's making 25,000 (having sold off his Big House and Cardinal Zin brands, and spun out Pacific Rim into a separate brand) and if everything goes according to plan, he'll eventually be making only a few thousand cases.

And what is that plan? "I do what feels right to me at my own peril," says Grahm. "You have to respect your own curiosity, and I just don't know any better."

The plan, he relates, has the singular goal of producing something very specific, what he calls a "true *vin de terroir*, a wine that expresses a sense of place.

"The only wines that matter are the wines of place. Everything else is dispensable and not necessary," he says. "But wines of place enrich the world. They make our world more interesting. Deeper. Like anew species of plant, or animal, or a star. A generic wine is beside the point. I couldn't make a *vin de terroir* wine 20 years ago. I didn't know how. I couldn't conceive of it."



"Obviously," he continues, "this takes time to unfold. You can't simply proclaim that you have one in your first vintage. [Ridge] Monte Bello is one of the few real *vins de terroir* in California."

And Grahm, young as he is in spirit, knows that he doesn't have a lot of time. Certainly not the centuries of experimentation that the Cistercian monks required to make Burgundy what it is today.

Which brings us back to that plan. Grahm is planting a vineyard from seeds near San Juan Bautista, seeds that he has gathered from select crosses of *vinifera* vines to create essentially new hybrids of grapevine. And instead of propagating this selection of vines the normal way, by grafting them to rootstock, Grahm is starting from the ground up, so to speak.

Once the vines have grown to a certain point, he plans on dry farming them, a practice which he believes is key to producing a *vin de terroir*.

"I think of *terroir* as a signal from the site" he says. "And I think there needs to be some amplification device. Dry farming is a way of amplifying the signal to the point of audibility. Or put another way, *not* dry farming shrinks the signal or makes it less expressive."

He goes on, “I can’t posit the mechanism for the presence of minerality in wine, but intuitively it seems obvious that a plant that has roots everywhere through a vast soil profile is going to take up a greater imprint or expression of site than a plant that has roots that are limited [to the smaller area defined by irrigation].”

By reducing the equation of wine to its most essential pieces, Graham hopes to create a *vin de terroir* in his lifetime. In the meantime (aka the time it takes to turn tiny seeds into a vineyard of viable grape vines) Graham continues to make his most iconic wine, the Rhone blend “Le Cigare Volant,” albeit in very different ways than he has historically.

“The wines are more serious” he says. “Whatever the heck that means. We pay more attention to what we do. A lot of it is the old clichés, but they’re really true -- we spend more time in the vineyard so we have to spend less time in the winery. We use exclusively indigenous yeasts, and the wines are therefore less showy, not as flashy. But I think they are more subtle and more interesting. Without any desire to be too narcissistic, this is really a sea change in my own maturity. It’s not about imposing my stylistic imprint on the wine. It’s worrying less about a wine coming out a certain way and trusting the wine to do what it’s going to do. I used to worry about color or the quality of aromatics. The wines are now paler and less fruity, and this is a beautiful thing. Because I backed away. It’s about letting go of control.”

Graham has certainly let go of a lot to get to this point, including, it seems worrying about whether his customers really wanted his wines to go the direction that he is taking them.

“I’ve made many errors in my life,” says Graham with a sigh, “But certainly one recent one is that I underestimated the difficulty in changing the consumer’s perception of the brand.”

Forget customers realizing just how differently the wines are being made now -- many customers still don’t know that most of the wines they’ve been buying for years aren’t actually Bonny Doon wines anymore. On the flip side, Graham has had a difficult time convincing many people, especially in the industry, to consider what is now quite an artisan product coming from a company that many felt was better at marketing than winemaking.

“It’s like that old joke,” Graham chuckles, “‘You fuck just one goat, and what do they call you...?’ It seems I will always be tainted by the Big House or being a marketing-focused company. But this is not just a marketing gimmick.”

Indeed, it would be hard to overstate just how radically things have changed at Bonny Doon Vineyards. The controlled free fall from 450,000 cases a year to 25,000 was not just a massive jettisoning of grape contracts and big tanks, it was a departure from modern, New World, industrial winemaking and a retreat to the kind of winemaking you expect to see

in the stone cellar behind some old French farmhouse. Gone are the enzymes, spinning cones, tartaric acid additions, stabilizers, colorants, yeast nutrients, and added tannins, not to mention the army of people required to do all that “winemaking” at scale.

And if you needed any further proof that Graham has not simply entered another phase of strategic marketing, you only need to look at the fact that the man has not only continued to make Syrah, but has started making several single vineyard bottlings of it. This in a time where people joke about STDs being easier to get rid of than a case of Syrah.

“Syrah is not dead,” says Graham, “It’s just planted in all the wrong places.”

Graham’s pursuit of this grape variety with his usual single-mindedness has yielded remarkable results. In fact, I believe he has recently made some of the best wines of his life out of Syrah, and in so doing, joined a small cadre of winemakers in California who are busy proving with alacrity that most people have no idea what they are doing when it comes to planting, growing, and making Syrah.

I had the chance recently to taste through many of the current releases from Bonny Doon, including a number of Graham’s small production experiments in aging his *Le Cigare Volant* blends in various vessels, all of which were distinctly different and quite illuminating.

*Full disclosure: some of the wines below were press samples.*

#### WHITE WINES

2008 “Le Cigare Blanc” White Blend,  
Arroyo Seco, Central Coast

Pale gold in color, this wine smells of ripe pears and apples. In the mouth it offers a lightly spicy, quite juicy body of lemongrass, pear, and apple flavors with a hint of yeasty quince flavor on the finish. Score: around 8.5.

2010 “Le Cigare Blanc Réserve en Bonbonne”  
White Blend, Arroyo Seco, Central Coast

Light cloudy gold in the glass, this wine smells of wet stones, chamomile, and candle wax. In the mouth the wine has a bright yellow-herbal flavor of yarrow (forgive me) and chamomile. Citrusy notes of lemon curd and citronella linger through the finish. Gorgeous. 55% Roussanne, 45% Grenache Blanc. 12.4% alcohol. Score: around 9.

2010 “Le Cigare Blanc” White Blend,  
Arroyo Seco, Central Coast

Pale gold in the glass, this wine smells of bright white flowers, a hint of banana, and pastry cream. In the mouth the wine has a lovely silky texture and flavors of white flowers, cold cream, mixed tropical



fruit cup, and a hint of a chamomile note in the finish. Good acidity, but could be sharper. Quite lovely nonetheless. 55% Roussanne, 45% Grenache Blanc. 12.7% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

#### 2010 Sparkling Albariño, Central Coast

Light greenish gold in the glass with medium-coarse bubbles, this wine smells of star fruit, tangerine zest, and wet stones. In the mouth the wine is bright and refreshing with green apple, star fruit, and a green grapey quality that makes it charming. 12.5% alcohol. Score: around 8.5. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

#### 2011 “Le Vol des Anges” Dessert White Blend, Arroyo Seco, Central Coast

Yellow gold in the glass, this wine smells of chamomile, honey, white peaches and cold cream. In the mouth the wine is exceedingly silky, with good acidity and only moderately sweet flavors of honey, chamomile, and wet stones. The wine has a tiny tannic grip to it on the finish. Quite pretty and delicious. A blend of 40% Roussanne and 60% Grenache Blanc. Score: around 8.5. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

### PINK WINES

#### 2009 “Vin Gris de Cigare” Rosé, Central Coast

An incredibly pale pink in color, this wine smells of rosehips, hibiscus, and crab apples. In the mouth, tart flavors of crab apple, raspberry and strawberry bounce around thanks to lively acidity, and the wine finishes clean and crisp. While not incredibly complex in flavor, the wine is everything you want a rosé to be. Score: between 8.5 and 9.

#### 2010 “Vin Gris de Cigare” Rosé, Central Coast

Pale peachy pink in color, this wine smells of orange peel and strawberries. In the mouth, slightly bitter flavors of strawberry, raspberry and watermelon rind mix with decent acidity. Missing a bit of zing that would take this wine to the next level. 12.8% alcohol. Score: between 8 and 8.5.

#### 2011 “Vin Gris de Cigare” Rosé, Central Coast

Pale coppery pink in the glass, this wine smells of watermelon, strawberry, and wet stones. In the mouth citrus peel, watermelon and strawberry flavors have a wonderful crisp tartness to them. Notes of orange peel linger in the finish. Bright, juicy, and everything you want from a rosé. Not a hint of sweetness, great acidity, and lovely texture to boot. Yum! Score: between 8.5 and 9. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

### RED WINES

#### 2006 “Le Cigare Volant” Rhône Blend, California

Dark garnet in color, this wine smells of blackberries, mulberries and woodsmoke. In the mouth the wine has a wonderfully smoky, black cherry core with notes of cassis and wet dirt. A hint of sweet vanilla emerges after a few seconds on the finish. Very nicely done. Score: around 9.

#### 2006 “Le Pousseur” Syrah, Santa Cruz Mountains

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of smoky cassis and black cherry. In the mouth the wine has a wonderfully smoky character as well, with cassis and blackberry and blueberry flavors mixed with a light bitter woodiness. Good acidity combined with the low 13.5% alcohol makes the wine quite easy to drink. Score: between 8 and 8.5.

#### 2007 “Le Cigare Volant” Rhône Blend, Central Coast

Medium garnet in the glass, this wine smells of freshly squashed blackberries and raspberries. In the mouth bright raspberry and blackberry flavors are juicy with nice acidity while woodier earthier notes that have a cinnamon kick linger through a long finish. Nicely balanced. 14.4% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9.

#### 2007 “Le Cigare Volant En Demi-Muid” Rhône Blend, Central Coast

Medium to dark garnet in the glass with a hint of lighter ruby to it, this wine smells of raisins, dried cherries, leather, and exotic wood spices with a hint of meatiness. In the mouth bright cherry, strawberry, and dried cherry and dried flower flavors swirl together with good acidity. A blend of 60% Grenache, 32% Syrah, 4% Mourvedre, and 4% Cinsault. Aged in demi-muid casks, which are oversize barrels holding 600 liters, compared to the usual 225 liters. 14.4% alcohol. Score: around 8.5. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

#### 2007 “Le Cigare Volant En Foudre” Rhône Blend, Central Coast

Medium to dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of earthier tones mixed with raspberry and cherry fruit. In the mouth, cherry, raspberry, and strawberry flavors mix with powdery tannins and bright acidity. Stony. Long finish. A blend of 60% Grenache, 32% Syrah, 4% Mourvedre, and 4% Cinsault. Aged in large old oak foudres, with a capacity of 10,000 liters. 14.4% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

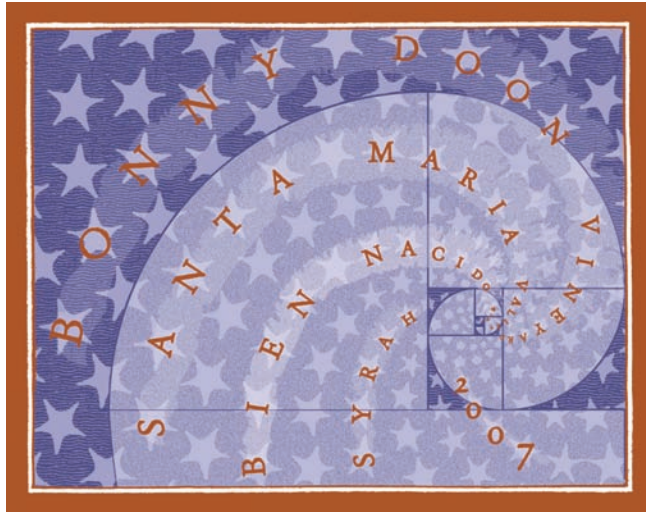
#### 2007 “Alamo Creek” Syrah, San Luis Obispo County

Dark garnet in color, this wine smells of blackberry and white pepper. In the mouth wonderful cassis, blueberry and white pepper flavors mix with a crystalline wet stone quality and smoky note that lingers in the finish with the white pepper. Gorgeous, supple tannins wrap around the edges of the wine. Quite charming. 13.3% alcohol. Score: around 9. [CLICK TO BUY](#)



2007 “Bien Nacido Vineyard” Syrah, Santa Maria Valley

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cassis, mulberry, and white pepper. In the mouth, stark flavors of wet stone, cassis, mulberry and white pepper swirl in a beautifully textured melange that feels like it is etched in the side of a mountain. Wonderfully austere, but very rewarding, the wine finishes long, airy, and floral. Fantastic. 13.5% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5. [CLICK TO BUY](#)



2008 “Le Cigare Volant Réserve en Bonne” Rhône Blend, Central Coast

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of mulberry and black cherry and blackberry with a hint of green herbs. In the mouth the wine is quite taut, with polished fine grained and very restrained tannins and a wonderful melange of black raspberry, mulberry and cherry flavors. A hint of dried herbs and miso paste lingers in the finish. Wonderfully acidity. A blend of 45% Grenache, 30% Syrah, 13% Mourvedre, 7% Cinsault, and 5% Carignane. 14.2% alcohol. Aged in glass bottles without touching wood. Score: around 9. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

2008 “Le Cigare Volant” Rhône Blend, Central Coast

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of blackberry, black raspberry, and cherry with a hint of leather. In the mouth lightly grippy tannins surround cherry, black raspberry, and other mixed berry flavors tinged with earth and leather. Hints of spice linger with the furry tongue of tannins through a long finish. A blend of 45% Grenache, 30% Syrah, 13% Mourvedre, 7% Cinsault, and 5% Carignane. 14.2% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

2008 “Alamo Creek” Syrah, San Luis Obispo County

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of rocky dirt with a hint of farmyard. In the mouth flavors of black cherry, blackberry and leather mix with wet dirt. Good acidity and a firm tannic grip in the front of the mouth. Fruit pervades the finish. Owner Randall Gramh describes this wine as “having a homeopathic touch of brett,” but I don’t find it objectionable in the slightest. 13.5% alcohol. Score: around 9. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

2008 “Bien Nacido X Block” Syrah, Santa Maria Valley

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of black olives, wet dirt, white pepper and blackberry. In the mouth wonderfully savory flavors of blackberry, black olive, and cassis mix with equally wonderful acidity and powdery tannins. A gorgeous forest floor and cassis flavor linger long in the finish. 13.9% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

2009 “Chequera” Syrah, Paso Robles

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine has an intense, sweet nose of cassis, violets, and blueberry aromas. In the mouth deep powdery tannins enclose dark blueberry and cassis flavors with a nice acidity. The wine finishes with a hint of creaminess, thanks to the powdery tannins in part, and perhaps due to some battonage (lees stirring) during fermentation. This is the inaugural release of this wine as a single vineyard bottling. 17.2% viognier blended in. 13.7% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9.

2009 “Le Pousseur” Syrah, Central Coast

Medium to dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of white pepper, wet earth and dark fruit and a hint of smoke. In the mouth, dark earth and cassis and blackberry flavors mix with woodsmoke and taut tannins. Very nice acidity. A blend of three different vineyards in the Central Coast. 13% alcohol. Score: around 8.5. [CLICK TO BUY](#)

2010 “Clos de Gilroy” Grenache, Central Coast

Medium garnet in the glass, this wine has a lightly soapy, berry smell to it. In the mouth flavors of raspberry and cherry mix with a light herbal tincture of sorts, though with that same soapy scent hanging in the background. Tart sour cherry accompanies lightly grippy tannins through the finish. 13.1% alcohol. Score: between 8 and 8.5.

2010 “Jespersen” Syrah Red California Edna Valley

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of gunpowder, smoke, and wet earth. In the mouth the wine offers dark blackberry and wet earth flavors with a strong smoky quality. Powdery tannins and great acidity. 12.7% alcohol. Stunning wine in its inaugural release. Score: between 9 and 9.5.

Posted by: Alder on October 27, 2012 11:35 PM

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