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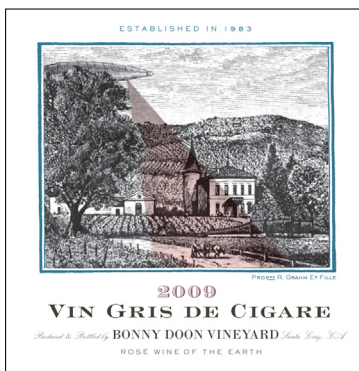
WINE: A VENERABLE AMERICAN ROSÉ GOES GRAY
Second in a two-part series

By Dave McIntyre

“You changed the vin gris,” I said, stating the obvious as Randall Graham poured me a taste of his 2009 Bonny Doon Vin Gris de Cigare. Instead of its usual robust rosé color, the wine was a lighter shade of pale: barely pink at all and, in the poor light of the room, almost gray.

Graham nodded. “I wanted to make a more honest wine,” he said. “I wanted to make a true gris.”

He looked worried, aware that he was tinkering with a product that had won many fans since he bottled his first vin gris in 1984. We were in Penn Quarter at a tasting of the Rhone Rangers, a group of vintners primarily in California, Oregon and Washington who produce wines from traditional Rhone Valley grapes such as syrah, grenache and viognier. (Virginia was ably represented at the tasting by Jordan Harris of Tarara Winery, who was pouring his syrah and viognier.) Graham, by far the best known of the dozen or so winemakers on hand and a 2009 James Beard Award winner for his book, “Been Doon So Long,” stood wedged in a corner behind a table cluttered with wine bottles and a tub of ice.



It would have been easy to miss him altogether, but then he came out with one of the offbeat analogies for which he is famous: “I find it reminiscent of a good Burgundy rosé, minimalist, like in jazz when you don’t play all the notes.” At least, that’s how I scribbled it in my notebook.

In our brief conversation at the Rhone Rangers tasting and in a subsequent e-mail exchange, Graham told me why and how he decided to change the Vin Gris de Cigare.

In 1984 he called the wine “vin gris” because at the time rosé was not in fashion. (Vin gris, which translates as “gray wine,” is in fact a type of rosé made primarily from red grapes, with the juice pulled off the grape skins almost immediately after crushing to avoid getting color.) “In the old days, the pink was largely a byproduct of the red wines we produced,” Graham says, referring to his Rhone-style blends called Le Cigare Volant and Old Telegram. “Because the grapes were not exactly perfect for red wine,

we were compelled to bleed off some of the juice to achieve greater concentration. The pink juice was high in Brix” -- a measure of sugar content -- “so we would either water it back or put the resulting wine through reverse osmosis or take it for a spin in the spinning cone to bring the alcohol back to a reasonable level.”

In other words, it was a product of modern industrial winemaking techniques widely used in California.

Four years ago, Graham embraced biodynamic viticulture, the somewhat holistic farming method based on the teachings of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner. Biodynamics have helped produce healthier grapes and more-balanced wines that don’t require massive intervention in the cellar to correct minor flaws, Graham says.

He is growing grapes specifically for the Vin Gris de Cigare, which allows him to harvest them at lower sugar levels and higher acidity, ideal for rosé. The 2009 is certified biodynamic and made primarily from grenache, with some cinsault, grenache blanc and roussanne. The grenache was left on the skins after pressing for a mere two hours, instead of the eight to 12 hours in what Graham calls “the dark old days.”

Back then, he says, “we would sometimes add a small percentage of red wine to correct the color, believing erroneously that our customers expected a wine that was a beautiful deep-pink color. The ‘09 is much paler and far less fruity than previous vintages. It has much greater elegance and restraint. It is more vinous, with a greater mineral aspect.” Like all Bonny Doon wines now, it was fermented using only indigenous yeast.

Dooniacs should approach the new vin gris with an open mind. It would be a mistake to view the pale hue as a sign of weakness, for while the 2009 is not as juicy as previous vintages, it nonetheless displays a subtle power. Rosé usually is a devil-may-care wine, but this one wants you to pay attention to its message, one of authenticity.

Graham is happy with his tinkering, yet he is still a little worried about how the market will react.

“This is so much closer to the wine I want to be making,” he says. “It feels absolutely great to be making more-natural wines with minimal manipulation. There is just a greater frankness to the wines, which I’m hoping and trusting our customers will appreciate.”

McIntyre can be reached at food@washpost.com.

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