



February, 2012

## WILD TABLE THE FIVE QUESTIONS

### RANDALL GRAHM: FOUNDER of BONNY DOON VINEYARD

I adore wines that speak clearly of the soil or rock that surrounds the vines. Some winemakers like Randall Graham have embraced the Rudolph Steiner methods of Biodynamics. Who was Rudolph Steiner? Rudolph Steiner was the founder of Theosophy and he attempted to find a synthesis between science and mysticism. What are Biodynamics? Biodynamics are a practical method of Organic farming. Biodynamics go much further than just the use of organic methods. Biodynamics takes into effect the entire cosmos. Some wine-geeks get pretty hot-headed when Biodynamics are discussed. Biodynamics embodies the ideal of ever-increasing ecological self-sufficiency just as with modern agro-ecology, but it includes ethical-spiritual considerations. This type of viticulture views the farm as a cohesive, interconnected living system. Some may think that the study and application of Biodynamics is a way-out thought, based in California—but they couldn't be further from the truth.

For one, Rudolph Steiner was from Austria. His work includes the acclaimed Waldorf Schools and their unique methods of teaching.

Randall Graham is student of the Rudolph Steiner philosophy of Biodynamic farming as it pertains to the production of wine.

*WRR: 1. Why wine? When did you catch the wine bug? What was your first taste of the juice like? Do you remember what it was?*

**Randall Graham:** Since I've been asked this question fairly frequently, I've had ample opportunity to reflect and, of course, ample opportunity to reconstruct/distort the real history. There were several moments that

I imagine might have been the triggers to my slightly checkered career in wine:

1) When I was still a student at UCSC, I used to attend Wednesday night wine tastings at the Cooper House in Santa Cruz (alas, long gone). The owner would offer tastings of 3-4 wines at a go, including for example, four white zinfandels, or four domestic Chenin Blancs. At the age of 20, I fancied myself quite the connoisseur. (Of course back then the metes and bounds of the known universe of wine were significantly more limited. Now, it appears that a new galaxy is formed every picosecond.)

2) When I finished my class work at UCSC, I spent the summer in Germany, studying German—ostensibly to complete my senior thesis on Martin Heidegger. This was the summer of 1974, and I accidentally found that I could purchase bottles of 1971 Spätlesen and Auslesen at the grocery store for about \$4-\$5 each. I would consume a bottle pretty much every night, while working on my German homework—with little ill effect to the quality of the work performed.

Now, the travesty and wastefulness of drinking these wines so unspeakably young still haunts me, but certainly the opportunity to have tasted these great wines likely permanently imprinted me on Riesling, (and perhaps on wine in general).

3) During that same summer, before visiting Germany, I spent a few days in Jutland, visiting with a lovely woman who taught English and music at a Danish hochschule, which is sort of like a cross between a junior college and a vocational school. She made hyle (elderflower) wine in her somewhat cramped bathroom. Granted, the wine itself was not very good, but there was something utterly alchemical about the carboys burbling away in the bathroom—utterly enchanting.

4) And then of course, the following year, I went to work at a wine shop in Beverly Hills (The Wine

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Merchant), where I was exposed to the most extraordinary wines on a virtually daily basis. I think that it was the rare experience of tasting '64 Cheval Blanc again and again (and again) that utterly sealed the deal.

But, as far as why it was wine and why not something else? This of course is a deeply philosophical question, and brings to mind the fact that at any moment, based on a single decision we take, our lives can careen off into any sort of direction, with all sorts of unexpected consequences. (We actually all live inside a Paul Auster novel.)

From the perspective of history, it does seem as if I am temperamentally unsuited to almost any other career than the one that I have chosen. For one thing, I appear to be dilettantish to the very core of my being, which is another way of saying that I'm very interested in almost everything, but have insufficient ability to focus on any one thing for a very protracted period of time. The fact that as a winery owner/winemaker/entrepreneur one has the opportunity, indeed the requirement to wear a very wide range of hats. This is incredibly cordial to my sort of personality/sensibility.

Amazingly, my career in wine has acted like a very interesting sort of enzyme, which seems to have unlocked certain abilities in me that I never imagined I possessed—the ability to write creatively for one—which I ended up doing, initially in the Bonny Doon newsletters, essentially out of fear that I would not otherwise be able to hawk my wares.

And, rather unexpectedly, I found that somehow I possessed something like an artistic sense, at least as far as design, and have been (mostly) successful in collaborating in the production of quite a number of wine labels, posters, advertisements, as well as spatial/architectural designs. Who knew? And of course, it seems that I have something like a real sense of taste—not that I am the most gifted or perceptive wine taster. (I am fooled rather more often than not.) But when I am really in the tasting groove, it seems that I have something like a reasonable sense of aesthetic balance, and seem to have the ability to swoop in on particularly felicitous sweet spots in the composition of a wine blend. You can call this a sort of bricolage, the ability to

assemble something coherent and possibly complex from a set of disparate bits.

And maybe my winemaking or grape growing ideas are also a sort of bricolage. I will most certainly never be a particularly gifted agriculturist—my head is too much in the clouds—and the essence of being a great farmer is the ability to be present with the land and the plants, to truly see (and feel) what is actually happening on one's farm. But I think that somehow I am able to combine/synthesize a number of ideas and take them to a certain imaginative conclusion.

As far as first real taste of wine. My family would celebrate Passover, so there was always the dreaded, archetypal Manischewitz Concord on the table—somehow I imagine this doesn't really count as wine. (It's more of a condiment, like cranberry sauce.) My first "adult" experience of wine was of tasting Blue Nun in high school, at the home of a quasi-girlfriend, Alison. Alison's mother, Betty, was an incredibly glamorous woman, and the fact that she consumed wine outside the context of a meal seemed to me to be the utmost in sophistication. Blue Nun was being advertised pretty heavily in those days with radio and TV spots done by Stiller and Meara; they were slightly



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suggestive, if memory serves. Maybe this was the gradual release of repression that was happening in the Sexy Sixties, but, in any event, as an impressionable adolescent, I came away with the notion that wine drinking was an incredibly grown up and sophisticated thing to do, never even imagining that there was such a thing as Comte de Vogüé Musigny, which is even more grown up and sophisticated.

[1] This certainly worked for Dostoyevsky as well. Maslovian aspirations aside, fear is an incredibly powerful motivator for performance.

***WRR: 2. Do you cook?***

I cook a bit, of course, but not so terribly well. Being a perfectionist, read neurotic, makes it very difficult to be a fearless cook, but I've been working on it, and now, having finally got the whole textural thing semi-under control (knowing what rare and medium-rare feel like), I feel pretty comfortable roasting almost anything. I had installed a very cool, wood burning oven a few years ago at my house, and that has given me great confidence. (Cooking, like almost everything else in life, is a largely a head game.) As far as influences, my mother was (and is) not a very inspired cook. (It's very hard for her to focus, and she is somewhat oblivious to the passage of time, so things do tend to get a bit overcooked.) But inadvertently, she's been an important negative influence for me—teaching me the lesson of how important mindfulness is in cooking, as it is in everything.

[2] The flip side of this is that perhaps some of these ideas might well be the result of a kind of febrile consciousness, and there is never any real certainty that these ideas might turn out to be utter rubbish as far as their practicality.

***WRR: 3. Do you own a smart phone? Use Twitter? Facebook. What are your links?***

I am pretty much of a technophobe, so I'm not really sure precisely what a smart phone is. (Would an iPhone qualify?) If so, maybe I do own a smart phone and I don't even know that I do. (That's not so smart.) But if I do, it is certain that I'm probably taking advantage of about .001% of its capabilities. One of my more tech-savvy colleagues, Meg Maker, is insisting that we print a special something something on our back label, a QVC?? (or is that the shopping network?), that enables

people with smart phones (who presumably know what they hell they're doing) to glean extra information about the wine. Maybe by the time this article comes out, I'll actually understand this a bit more. *Editor's note:* I think what she is referring to is a QR Code.

I do use Twitter rather extensively, and that's rather a long story (which I'll shorten here for our purposes.) I was out on a sales trip a few years back with my sales manager, Bradley, in Newport, Rhode Island, if memory serves, and were chatted up by two young women who asked if we were "on Twitter." First thought was that this was perhaps a psychoactive drug with a nomenclature unique to the northeast. Then, of course, I was told that it was a "social network," and that I should really consider joining it. (I was myself still a bit dim-witted about the whole idea of a "social network." "How do you do it?" I asked somewhat plaintively. "You just talk about whatever is on your mind, like a bird tweeting in a tree," I was told. For the life of me, I couldn't really grasp the concept, but I dutifully joined, and started tweeting my head off.

It was not more than few months later that Doug Cook, then an executive at Twitter and a major wine-geek (@ablegrape) called me and asked me if I would be willing to conduct a tasting at the Twitter office in San Francisco. I gave the geekiest presentation I could possibly manage, bringing up a lot of particularly arcane subject matter. I observed the Twitter executives taking lots of photos with their "smart phones" and texting away a storm. A few weeks later, I was told that I was now a "recommended Twitterer." After that happened, my viewership (Twittership?) increased somewhat exponentially, and as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, I seemed to be cited over and over as someone in the wine business who actually "got" Twitter and this technophobe has been invited to all sorts of conferences as something of an "expert" on the subject of wine and social media.

I still (like virtually everyone else) have not yet figured out how to monetize Twitter, and maybe that is not something that really one ever does. It is an interesting outlet for me—takes up far too much of my time, but it has also put me in touch with some rather extraordinary people, with whom I've cultivated real and non-virtual relationships, if that distinction can still be drawn.



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As far as my “links,” you may well know them better than I. My Twitter handle is @RandallGrahm, and I’m not really sure, to my embarrassment, precisely how to find myself on FaceBook. I still do not have a clue as far as what is appropriate protocol for selecting “friends” on FaceBook. Do they need to be your real friends? In honesty, I do seem to spend a disproportionate amount of time anguishing about who is to be my real friend on Facebook and who are my legitimate contacts on “Linked In.” It is my belief that perhaps we are all a little bit too connected these days for anyone’s good.

[3] My partner, Chinshu, always snorts when she hears I’ve been invited to one conference or another. “Expert! You can barely figure out how to turn your computer on.”

*WRR: 4. What is in your refrigerator right now? Any exotic ingredients?*

My partner, Chinshu, is Taiwanese and she seems to stock a pretty compendious collection of various and sundry Taiwanese vinegars, fish sauces, pickles and such. Which she very seldom touches. It is an incredibly lucky thing for all of us that most of these condiments contain about 30% salt—therefore possessing shelf-lives well into the 22nd century—as my partner, frugal Taiwanese that

she is, is constitutionally incapable of ever throwing anything away. The product mix in the refrigerator is further informed by the fact that our daughter, Amélie, is a rather strict vegetarian, and complicating matters, she is, to the infinite chagrin of our parents, no lover of cheese nor of milk products in general. As a result, our fridge is stocked to the brim with tofu and all of the necessary accoutrements—various sorts of miso and vinegars to render the tofu palatable to the eight-year old palate. There is always some alternative source of protein—beans, grains or nuts—that is being auditioned for possible consideration on the culinary center stage.

Being myself somewhat of a hypochondriac, but also sincerely seeking to counteract the effects of far too many rich meals on the road and far too many fat and protein-intensive winemaker dinners, one might also find a good selection of salad-y rabbit food, as well as cruciferous vegetables in the crisper (I rather like the Escher-like aspect of romanesco). There will also be a pretty diverse collection of nutritional supplements—Omega 3 fish oil capsules, colloidal mineral supplements, “Green Radiance,” and a bottle of aloe vera. Since my partner is of Asian descent, her capacity to consume alcohol is somewhat limited, so there will typically be the remnants of a bottle of white wine, typically a bottle of Riesling.

*WRR: 5. Is there any wine you’ve enjoyed that brings a tear to your eye when you taste it? Why?*

Well, I haven’t had too many wines lately that have brought tears to my eyes; I had most of my eye-tearing wines when I was much younger and worked at the wine shop (1975). Everything was so very new to me then, and I was in a more or less constant state of wonder and amazement. In a sense it is rather tragic that it is so difficult to maintain this sense of openness and wonder with wine, and sometimes it is hard not to feel a bit jaded.

I still get a great sense of pleasure when I am privileged to consume a great bottle, but the experience is often a lot more cerebral. I tend to analyze the experience—how did they manage to achieve such and such an effect?—and that does tend to take me away from the primal experience. But recently I had a wine that rather blew me away. I was at Oliveto Restaurant in Oakland and I asked my friend, Bob Klein, the owner to pour me something interesting and amazing. He poured



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me a glass of something that was very elegant, spicy but also seemingly quite mineral intensive—a lot of persistence on the palate. “Is it a Nerello Mascalese from Mt. Etna?” I asked. “Good guess, but no,” he said.

Well, it turns out that it was a good guess because the wine (2008 Los Bermejos Listan Negro Tinto “Maceracion Carbonica”) from the island of Lanzarote in the Canary Islands is made from grapes grown on pure volcanic soil. “Let me show you a picture of the vineyards,” Bob said, and went off to print out a picture from the winery website. The vineyards looked as if they were grown on a moonscape, if the moon had palm trees.

The grapes were planted in what were essentially craters, ringed with basalt stones. The story gets even more complicated. A few days later I was having dinner with Jon Bonné of the Chronicle and mentioned to him that recently I had the most amazing Listan Negro. “Did you know that that grape has a synonym?” he asked.

“Any idea what that might be?” I was clueless.

In any event, it turns out that Listan Negro is (more or less) a synonym for the Mission grape, the first grape

that was grown in California. The Mission grape has the distinction, at least in my book, as being possibly the worst vinifera grape ever conceived—no color, no flavor, no acid. And yet in this iteration, it was absolutely beautiful. This in fact brought tears to my eyes.

[4] My mother shares the same trait of being unable to throw away any sort of comestible. I satirized her pernicious habit in “Trojanoy’s Complaint,” a literary spoof that was collected in *Been Doon So Long*:

A Randall Grahm Vinthology (published by University of California Press in paperback)—pardon the shameless self-promotion. It is of course ironic that having escaped likely food poisoning from my mother’s kitchen, I am now compelled to run a similar gauntlet every day in my own home. I am in the habit of moving the oldest items in the refrigerator to the back, where they are no longer noticed, and then on a day I imagine my partner to be slightly distracted, I will stealthily toss the most mold-encrusted jar I can find, patiently waiting until the time is right to throw away the next most poisonous Taiwanese foodstuff.

[5] My daughter is now a vegetarian. Anything containing a molecule of animal protein is ganz verboten.

[6] She seems to make the exception for melted cheese when it occurs on pizza, but is absolutely adamant about not consuming any food product that has been situated even adjacent to a piece of cheese. The slight cheese hysteria really seems to be the only minor character flaw in her otherwise thoroughly delightful personality. She really is a total joy, just a little too skinny.

- Warren Bobrow

*Warren Bobrow is the Food and Drink Editor of the 501c3 non profit Wild Table on Wild River Review located in Princeton, New Jersey. He is a unique writer/mixologist on everything from cocktail flavoring and wine writing to restaurant reviews. He also writes for Edible Jersey, Voda Magazine, Foodista and Tasting Panel Magazine. Warren is the “On Whiskey” columnist for OKRA Magazine in New Orleans part of the Southern Food and Beverage Museum.*



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