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CALIFORNIA RHÔNES DIVERSE STYLES, RISING STARS

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A Rhône Ranger Rides Again

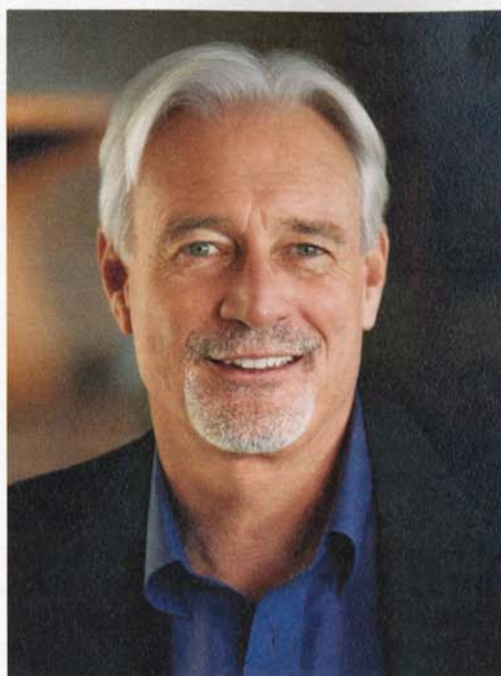
Randall Graham insists he has grown up, as in matured. He is earnest in his desire to shed his whimsical image and strike a more serious stance. That Graham's new wines are among the best he's made in years adds credence to his plan to reboot his livelihood.

If you've been following Graham's mercurial career, it's easy to wonder whether the new posture is for real or whether it's a front for the perhaps irrepressible jester in him. He has recast and reinvented himself so many times in the past 30 years that it's natural to ask which Randall Graham we're dealing with. And Graham understands that.

Nearing 60, he still pulls his thinning hair into a ponytail and still thrives on contrarian thinking. In three decades of making wine—and waves—his roles included, first and most famously, being an early advocate for Rhône varieties in California, placing him among a group of winemakers known as the Rhône Rangers. Graham was at the head of this movement as it gained steam in the 1980s, even posing as the masked man for a *Wine Spectator* cover (April 15, 1989). His Cigare Volant and Old Telegram, the latter a takeoff on the Rhône Valley's famous Vieux Télégraphe and now in its 25th year, were among the first California wines to blend Syrah with Grenache and Mourvèdre.

Over time, he has pursued many of the world's greatest grapes, including stabs at Cabernet and, in Oregon, Pinot Noir, and tinkering with Nebbiolo and Sangiovese. He built his Bonny Doon winery into a 450,000-case operation before selling off most of the labels, including value brand Ca' del Solo Big House, in 2006.

For many, though, he is known less for fine wines or being a visionary than for his antics and theatrics. When he denounced corks and championed twist-offs, he staged an elaborate mock funeral for the cork; a prodigious wordsmith, he penned *Been Doon So Long*, a smorgasbord of thoughts and witticisms. It is written much in the same flighty style as his esoteric, eclectic newsletters, reflecting a creative mind that spins like a carousel of flash cards.



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It's precisely this madcap pace and ever-shifting focus at the expense of quality that Graham is attempting to address. His track record would suggest this would be unlikely.

Still, he is persuasive in pitching his newest venture, and newest vintages, all under the Bonny Doon label. His goal now, he claims, is to focus on *terroir*-based wines, including a new project at his estate vineyard in San Juan Bautista, Calif., near Hollister just east of Monterey Bay.

The latest wines are striking for their structure and individuality, and reunite Graham with some of the grapes he advocated early on and that helped make his reputation as a serious winemaker.

The standout is the 2008 Bonny Doon Syrah from Bien Nacido Vineyard in Santa Barbara's Santa Maria Valley (92 points, \$42), showcasing dense berry, pepper and hot brick notes. The 2007 Nebbiolo Monterey County Ca' del Solo Estate Vineyard (90, \$40) is lighter yet racy.

The 2008 Le Cigare Volant Central Coast (89, \$38) is sleek and engaging, while the 2008 Le Cigare Volant En Bonbonne Unfiltered Reserve Central Coast (89, \$65) is pleasantly earthy. The new frontier is what Graham calls the "great experiment of Popelouchum" at San Juan Bautista, a property he bought four years ago. He describes this as an ambitious undertaking, which "turns conventional wisdom about grapegrowing on its head."

"It begins," he says in his mind-bending "Grahmian" style, "with the premise that you want to essentially obscure varietal character, allow it to recede into the background to allow a different quality—the unique features of *terroir*—to become the dominant element." The salient features include old-fangled, low-tech, head-trained, dry-farmed vines along with the creation of new vinifera varieties via grape breeding and vines grown from seed.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. "In many ways, I feel so very much as I did at the very beginning of my career," Graham says, "when everything was before me, and I didn't know shit, but imagined that I did."

This is the new Graham, the one he hopes wine lovers will embrace. If he delivers on the promise of his most recent wines, he has a good shot at redemption.

Senior editor James Laube has been with *Wine Spectator* since 1981.

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In his latest blogs, James Laube discovers a decline in cork taint in California wines, plus an increase in New World wineries using twist-offs. Join the conversation with other members at www.winespectator.com/laube.