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Wine Jester Gets Serious

A book from Bonny Doon's Randall Graham traces his evolution from enfant terrible to terroir obsessive.

By Corie Brown



Bonny Doon Vineyard owner Randall Graham is slow to smile these days. The pioneering California winemaker sold off his wildly profitable “Cardinal Zin” and “Big House Red” wines in 2006 and now is struggling to make and sell a very different kind of wine, “authentic” wine.

“American winemakers would all be filled with existential angst if they had a clue,” Graham says. “They should be asking, ‘Did I do it right?’ ‘Could I do it better?’ But they aren’t. Everything is always ‘perfect.’ And this is in a country where nothing is worked out yet!”

Graham’s conversion from court jester of the American wine industry -- everything is a pun at Bonny Doon -- to a serious winemaker is documented in the just-released “Been Doon So Long” (University of California Press). The book is a collection of his erudite musings, published over the last two decades in missives sent out to the Bonny Doon Vineyard mailing list. Wine lovers, particularly ones who have followed the fits and starts of the still evolving American wine industry, will relish every delicious word.

Graham wrote his story as he was living it, not with the remove of a diarist, but with the spontaneity of a salesman hawking his wares. His parodies and poems, first and foremost, are promotional materials. With a 1987 spoof of wine critic Robert Parker, “How I Spent My Summer Vacation,” Graham launched himself as kid eager for a laugh.

“I love ‘Trojanoy’s Complaint’ -- so completely, deliciously naughty, so much energy,” Graham says of his 1999 essay. “Saying those naughty things was immensely liberating.” Still, that was his winemaker’s adolescence.

When he reached “A Meditation on Terroir: The Return” in 2008, wine was no longer a joke. He had grown up. His own existential crisis left him a sincere and committed terrorist. Great wine, “authentic” wine, he says, is possible only when it reflects the place where the grapes are grown or, as the French say, the terroir.

To truly express terroir, wine grapes must be organically dry-farmed according to Rudolf Steiner’s biodynamic principles, says Graham. It takes time -- indeed, generations -- to get it right. Too often, he says, the difficult work of searching out the proper places to grow grapes is determined by market forces, not geological formations.

A Winemaker’s Evolution

It has been a problem for Graham that he first discussed how to make great wine and then belatedly decided to try to do it. For years, his words soared, but his wines lacked direction and integrity. Now, with more grey than brown in his signature ponytail, Graham is fully engaged in that difficult winemaking work.

Still, he believes that he’s headed in the right direction. Much of the rest of the American wine industry, he says, thinks they were born at home plate, self-certifying whatever place they happen to own as worthy of Grand Cru status. Graham advocates a humbler approach. It is too early in the evolution of the American wine industry, he says, to be certain about anything.

His current Bonny Doon wines are shadows of what he believes he will produce eventually, but Graham hopes wine lovers will find some of the “truth” his wines had been lacking. He wants people to follow his journey as a winemaker, hopes they will notice improvements in each vintage. There is real yearning in his voice as he says, “My wines are still wines of effort. I think they are really good, but they don’t yet represent a place. Drink my wines to taste the journey I am on.”

Of all of the wines he makes, Graham points to his 2008 Bonny Doon Ca’ Del Solo Albarino as “a touchstone in my journey.” And his Le Cigare Volant Rhone-style red wines, always his pride, are improving steadily, with the ‘05 Cigare a turning point.

“I think of wine in quasi-metaphysical terms. The lees (sediment from fermentation) are the unconscious of the wine, an element you need to integrate into the wine’s consciousness. If you fail to integrate the unconscious, it will overwhelm you. But if you succeed, you are stronger for it. We mastered the lees in the ‘05 Cigare. It has a depth that wasn’t in the earlier vintages.”

Among his writings collected in this new volume, Graham has a favorite: “The Vinferno” (2006). In this parody of Dante’s “Inferno,” Graham writes about a vineyard he sees in a dream. His new property (a 280-acre parcel in San Juan Bautista, about 45 minutes southeast of Santa Cruz in San Benito County), he says, is the vineyard he saw in that dream. And just like the dream, there is a mountain lion living on the site. “Our new property has soils with limestone and decomposed granite with fractured rocks. It’s on a slope with a northeast exposure. It has charisma.”

Reading “Been Doon So Long” takes time. Graham delights in linguistic contortions and flights of fancy that can be more grandiose than graceful. “The old Randall in this book was a little more manic, a little more ADD than I am now. I’ve grown up, a little bit. Now, I think I have an opportunity to do something special. If someone can make a vin de terroir, I have a shot at being that person. I’m obliged to try. When I die, I want to feel I gave it my best shot.”

Never a man of half-measures, Graham is calling himself to account and challenging the American wine industry to follow his lead.

Corie Brown is the co-founder and general manager of Zester Daily. A former editor and writer with the Los Angeles Times, she is writing a book about wine and climate change.

Photo by Chris Fager

To view Graham’s video about “the non-trivial level of existential angst I experience on a daily basis, especially in the fashioning of Serious Wines such as Le Cigare Volant,” go to <http://bit.ly/4V1pyp>.