

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Funeral for the Cork



"This heartfelt wake for the old stinker."

After a four-hundred-year history of colorful chaos and quixotic characters, New York City is a hard place to either shock or impress. Yet it had never seen anything quite like the Funeral for the Cork held there on October 2, 2002. Shortly after noon, a gray 1937 Buick hearse pulled up to the Vanderbilt Avenue entrance of the majestic Grand Central Terminal in midtown Manhattan. Out of the vehicle stepped four pallbearers, three wearing black suits and one sporting a dark purple tuxedo and a light purple, ruffled shirt. After the steel-gray casket was removed from the hearse, a trumpeter playing taps led the pallbearers and the casket through the railroad terminal and up to the Campbell Apartment on the southwest corner of the station's balcony. The apartment had been the office of the 1920s tycoon John W. Campbell, the chairman of Commerce Clearing House, a credit-reference firm to the city's important garment industry. Campbell decorated his fifty-eight-foot-long and twenty-five-foot-wide office in a grand European style with a painted beamed ceiling, a mas-

sive stone fireplace, and elaborate tapestries. By 2002, it had been turned into a bar, although most of the furnishings and the grandeur remained.

The pallbearers solemnly placed the casket in front of the fireplace and then opened it. Inside was a figure made of corks that had been crafted by the California sculptor Wes Modes. This was the corpse of Thierry Bouchon. For those who enjoyed—or understood—the pun, the corpse's name is a play on the French word for corkscrew.

Before dinner, Randall Grahm, the chief pallbearer in the purple tuxedo and founder of California's Bonny Doon Vineyard, stood in front of the casket and first thanked his "fellow mourners" for coming to "this heartfelt wake for the old stinker." Then he invited British wine writer Jancis Robinson to give the eulogy. Dressed in black with only a modest gold brooch for decoration, Robinson began in mock solemnity, "Oh, Cork. Oh, Cork. Oh, Corky, Corky, Cork." She went on to pay tribute to cork's many excellent qualities as a way to seal a bottle, adding, "You've had a jolly good run, Monsieur Bouchon." But then she denounced his "barky majesty," saying, "The great big supertanker SS *Screwcap* has set sail, and there will be no turning back."

After the eulogies, the guests sat down to dinner, which proved once again that nothing succeeds like excess. The candlelit evening included an eleven-course dinner accompanied by no less than thirty-four Bonny Doon wines. All through the evening Grahm hovered over diners pouring more and more of his wines.

Inspiration for the dinner came from an obscure, spade-bearded French intellectual named J. K. Huysmans, whose most famous work, *À rebours* (Against the Grain), is a tale of a decadent and ailing aristocrat in Paris who celebrated the temporary loss of his virility with an all-in-black party. Everything for his affair was black, from the food to the naked female servants who presented the food and drink. Mourner-in-chief Grahm copied Huysmans in as many details as possible, although—respectfully—there were no naked black servants. Main courses included a Black Squid Ink Risotto and Black Mole-Roasted Venison. For dessert there were diverse dark trifles and black nectarines as well as a chocolate tortoise with faux jewels in tribute to the "jeweled tortoise" at the Huysmans dinner.

For those unable to join the New York City fun, the *Wine Spectator* in its next issue carried a tombstone advertisement duly noting that M. Thierry Bouchon (1585–2002), "known to his close friends as Corky," had died after a long illness with "toxin 2,4,6-trichloroanisole implicated in his demise."

The New York City Funeral for the Cork and the obituary did not surprise the California wine community. Nothing that Randall Grahm could ever do—perhaps not even if he had used naked black servants—would shock them. In a business that had lost its sense of humor somewhere in the early 1980s, the Bonny Doon founder was California wine’s resident iconoclast.

Born in Los Angeles and raised in Beverly Hills, Grahm was an unfocused professional student when he discovered wine. After graduating from high school in 1970, he traveled north to the University of California campus at Santa Cruz, aka Uncle Charlie’s Summer Camp. It was the right place for his free spirit. There were no letter grades, only pass or fail, and the nearby beach was considered more important than any classroom. The students, Grahm says today, were “very smart, highly sensitive, socially retarded, and lazier than shit.” After two years as a premed student, Grahm switched his major to philosophy. His senior thesis was going to be on *Dasein*, the phenomenological analysis of human existence that Martin Heidegger, the controversial early-twentieth-century philosopher, outlined in his book *Being and Time*.

While working on his thesis, Grahm got a job sweeping floors at the Wine Merchant, a retail store near his parents’ home in Beverly Hills. There he had the opportunity to taste daily some of the world’s great wines. Soon the thesis on *Dasein* was history. He applied to enter the wine program at the University of California, Davis, but was first turned down. He was finally accepted on the condition that he retake all the science courses that he had first had as a premed. Once in the Davis program, Graham was older than most of the students and something of a troublemaker, challenging professors in a way younger students dared not. Before graduating in 1979, he tasted a magnum of 1949 Musigny Comte de Vogüé and became a Pinot Noir fanatic. “It was about as great a wine experience as one can have in this lifetime,” he recalls.

Grahm first went to Oregon to investigate Pinot there and met David Lett, who had pioneered cold-climate wine in that state. Then he traveled to the Santa Cruz Mountains after hearing that Ken Burnap at Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard had made some outstanding Pinot. With financial help from his parents, Grahm planted a twenty-eight-acre vineyard in Bonny Doon, a hamlet north of Santa Cruz, after studying temperature data collected in the 1930s that indicated it would be a great place to grow his favorite grape. The experiment, though, failed. Later he discovered the information he was using to make the decision was wrong. Temperatures

had been registered at a research station located below a temperature inversion layer, while his property was above it. In addition, the soil was sandy loam, while Pinot does best in limestone. Finally, he probably irrigated the vines too much instead of forcing the roots to go deeper to find water. Fortunately, though, more studies led Grahm to conclude that the area might be good for warmer-weather Rhône Valley-style grapes.

Kermit Lynch, a California wine importer and Rhône champion, had introduced Grahm to those wines. He first looked into planting Syrah, the grape that forms the backbone for Rhône's great Hermitage wines. At the time, though, there were only two Syrah vineyards in all of California, one in the Napa Valley and one in Paso Robles southeast of San Francisco. Then he investigated Grenache, the world's second most widely planted variety, which grows abundantly in southern France and Spain. In California there was lots of it in the San Joaquin Valley, but little in the cooler, coastal areas where Grahm's vineyard was located. While reading *The Wines of the Rhône* by John Livingstone-Learmonth, Grahm learned about the magic and mystery of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, a wine made of up to thirteen different grapes, but primarily Grenache and Mourvèdre, a vine known in California as Mataro.

In 1984, Grahm made the first vintage of Le Cigare Volant, a wine that he proudly calls "a tribute to a European wine without being a poor imitation." From the Livingstone-Learmonth book he also learned that the village fathers of Châteauneuf-du-Pape had in 1954 outlawed the landing in local vineyards of flying saucers, which were also called flying cigars. So Grahm called his new wine The Flying Cigar or Le Cigare Volant. The wine's label showed a spacecraft hovering menacingly over a vineyard, seemingly about to land. When the wine was released in 1986, the wacky name and the unusual grapes were enough to get a small story in the *Wine Spectator*. Bonny Doon Vineyard was then selling only thirty thousand cases a year, but business soon took off. Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate* also gave Le Cigare Volant scores in the 90s.

Three years later, Grahm was on the cover of the *Wine Spectator* with the headline "The Rhône Ranger." When the magazine editors told him they wanted to take his picture sitting on a horse just so no one missed the connection to television's Lone Ranger, he replied that he had a neighbor who had the appropriate white horse. The only problem was that the animal had a small patch of black hair on its head unlike the Lone Ranger's horse, Silver, which was pure white. A touch-up with white shoe polish, however, took care of that.

Although his Davis degree was in plant science, Grahm's talents are more as a vintner than a viticulturist. And when it comes to winemaking, he's a relentless experimenter. Each year he produces a dozen unusual wines that he sells to the winery's club, which is called DEWN (Distinctive Esoteric Wine Network). The Bonny Doon Web site calls the wines "adventurous and highly sought after acts of the viticultural high wire." Grahm is an advocate of controversial micro-oxygenation, a technique developed in France in the 1990s that adds small amounts of oxygen to wine in tanks to soften harsh tannins. He opposes high-alcohol wines and scrupulously works to stop fruit from getting "grotesquely overripe." Perhaps Grahm's most unusual experiment was in 2000, when he put rocks in barrels of wines to see how that would influence the flavor. After all, winemakers have for centuries been praising the mineral flavors in some wines. He put different rocks in five barrels, then threw a few pebbles into test bottles before he sealed them. Some experiments, he says, turned out "quite obnoxious" but others were "interesting." He never introduced the practice in his regular wines, and none of the bottles were ever released for sale.

While much of the international wine establishment makes local versions of such noble grapes as Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot, and Pinot Noir, Grahm is the champion of what he calls the "ugly-duckling grape varieties." That includes not only Rhône grapes but also Italian ones. "The world is a better place for all the oddball grapes that grow in Italy," he says. In 1990, he bought a vineyard in the nearby prison town of Soledad and began making Italian-style wines that are sold under the Ca' del Solo Big House label, a play on the term for solitary confinement in the prison.

Bonny Doon's top two wines, Le Cigare Volant and Old Telegram, a takeoff on the Rhône's famous Vieux Télégraphe, sell for only about \$30, far less than most California producers charge. Ever the maverick, Grahm says that many California wines are overpriced and consumers can often find better values with European ones. Such outrageous, although accurate, opinions have only solidified Grahm's reputation as the Peck's Bad Boy of California wine.

Grahm also fostered a unique brand of marketing. He claims that this style is due to his inherent shyness, although not many people would describe him that way. The winery's labels are known for their over-the-top designs that mix up type fonts with stream-of-consciousness writing and unusual illustrations. The Bonny Doon Web site is also an eclectic mix of fun and games.

Grahm's impishness is best on display in the company's newsletter. From spring 2005 through spring 2006 he wrote a three-part series entitled *Da Vino Commedia* patterned after Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Grahm has never met a pun he didn't like, and his satire is chockablock with jokes in English, French, German, Italian, Latin, and Yiddish. He skewers everyone in the wine business with equal disdain. In a move guaranteed to lose him any remaining support from 100-point wine reviewers such as Robert Parker and *Wine Spectator*, he attacked their "quasi-mystical numerology," writing, "Wine criticism has taken on the emotional tonality of a football game. Our wines, winemakers and wine critics are becoming even more competitive, bigger, brawnier, tougher and macho." Grahm has so far done only the first part of Dante's great work, the *Inferno*—or as he calls it the *Vinferno*. He has no plans, for now, to parody the *Purgatorio* or the *Paradiso*.

For many years before the Funeral for the Cork, Grahm struggled with different closures. When his winery was first opened, he used corks along with everyone else. He had just enough personal experiences with tainted corks, however, to be uneasy about them. In the early 1990s, he tried the Sabaté Altec in hopes that it would remove the danger of contamination on his line of Rieslings, but found it gave wines an off taste that he thought came from the glue that held the agglomerated cork together.

After that unhappy episode, Grahm used Supreme Corq from 1995 to 1998. The first two years, only part of Bonny Doon's production had them, but in 1997 and 1998 the entire bottling, including Cigare Volant, was under plastic. That experience was "a big mistake," he now says. "The wines didn't last." Grahm is still not sure exactly what happened. He doesn't think the seal failed and suspects that something in the plastic cork's material leached into the wine in trace amounts and caused oxidation. "That's my theory, but it is not based on science," he says.

After plastic, Grahm reluctantly went back to natural corks, but immediately began searching for a better closure. Almost by default, Stelvin screwcaps looked like the most attractive alternative. That the technology had been around for a long time and was well understood also attracted him. By 1999, Grahm had concluded that Stelvin screwcaps were the answer to his long-nagging problem of what to put in the neck of wine bottles.

Some issues, though, were holding him back. One was cost. The new bottling equipment needed for the screwcaps was going to run \$80,000, not an insignificant sum for a modest winery. But Grahm was willing to make the investment.

In addition, there was the perennial question of whether the American market was ready for screwcaps. During endless hours of meetings, the Bonny Doon staff struggled with how to introduce wines with this new closure. Grahm's staff unanimously favored testing Stelvins in a small, but significant, market such as a single state. "We don't want the company to crash and burn over this, so let's test it in a state or one market or two," said David Amadia, the company's sales manager.

"Don't you think the big companies have already done studies that show customers don't want this?" replied Grahm. "Otherwise they would have adopted them. But I think we can change history. It won't help just to prove that we can sell screwcaps in Kansas." Grahm argued they needed to do it nationally and make a big bang. The company, however, should only do it with one wine—and not repeat the mistake of Supreme Corq, when it did its whole line. "We need to do this on a big enough scale that we'll get national attention . . . that will get us national buzz."

After several more meetings, the Bonny Doon staff reluctantly came over to Grahm's side. After all, it was his business, and if he wanted to bet the company on screwcaps, it was his decision. The group finally decided to bottle the company's Big House line of wines with Stelvin screwcaps. That would mean seventy thousand cases of Big House Red and ten thousand of Big House White. The wines sold for about \$10 a bottle and made up some 35 percent of the company's total production. Grahm ended the meeting when the decision was taken by telling the group, "But we can't fail at this. We're putting all our chips on red. This can't fail."

On May 15, 2002, Bonny Doon announced it would be bottling its Big House line in screwcaps. It would be the largest commitment an American winery had ever made to the new technology.

As Bonny Doon's top executives were struggling with how to make sure the screwcap launch wouldn't fail, Grahm remembered that "funny, strange book" by J. K. Huysmans and the all-in-black party. Maybe that was just the high-profile event they needed to capture the public's attention.