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Bonny Doon's Graham Finds Great Winemaking Elusive

Wine Talk by Robert Whitley

Lunch with winemaker Randall Graham the other day was a trip, as I suspected it might be. Among other things, I learned that evil spirits haunt the Languedoc region of southern France, near Carcassonne, where I vacationed over the summer. Seems Randall spent a night in Carcassonne some years ago and believes his body was invaded.

That would explain a few things, though with the “Doonster” you sometimes don’t know whether he’s giving you the tongue-in-cheek magic carpet ride or simply his unique, psychedelic vision of the world. No matter, it’s all part of the shtick, the persona Graham cleverly projected when he launched his most important wine, Bonny Doon Le Cigare Volant, a quarter-century ago.

Le Cigare Volant in French translates literally to the flying cigar, which can be interpreted to mean flying saucer. Le Cigare Volant, the wine, is Graham’s interpretation of the classic French red blend from the Rhone Valley, Chateaufeuf-du-Pape. Sometime in the early 1950s the vignerons of Chateaufeuf-du-Pape successfully advocated a law forbidding le cigare volant — flying saucers were what they had in mind — from hovering near or landing in their vineyards, lest they be impounded.

Graham had a bit of fun with that, and to this day, the Le Cigare Volant label depicts a flying saucer beaming up a winemaker from his oxcart in what looks to be the south of France. Geography buffs might note that Carcassonne and Chateaufeuf-du-Pape are not that far apart, though I don’t necessarily draw a direct connection between the invasion of Graham’s body and his wild imagination.

I’m more inclined to believe there are some mighty funny mushrooms growing near the Bonny Doon encampment in California’s Santa Cruz Mountains, or there’s something mildly hallucinogenic in the water. Whatever the source, Randall’s star is forever hitched to his witty but whacky spin on the world of wine.

“If I died tomorrow, I would be remembered as a great marketer,” Graham told me. On paper that would appear to be a boast. It was anything but.

Randall Graham, you should know, is a student of wine. He has walked the fabled vineyards of France and Italy in search of the truth, believing as serious winemakers do that the secrets of great wine are kept in the vineyards.

On some level, despite critical acclaim, Graham seems to believe he’s never made what he would consider a great wine, a wine for the ages. I might disagree, but what I think doesn’t matter. Randall knows what he wants.

“To make wines that taste of their terroir,” he said, adding that his quest is for wines that bear the signature characteristics of a specific vineyard or place.

The Bonny Doon and Ca’ del Solo wines for which Graham is rightly famous are very, very good, but they probably aren’t easily connected in the imagination — nor on the palate — back to the vineyard source. In Graham’s mind, all great wines are.

Toward that objective, he has purchased land in California’s Cienega Valley, near the town of San Juan Bautista, northeast of Monterey. Calera, which produces world-class pinot noir and chardonnay, would be the nearest neighbor of great repute.

The plan is to plant vineyards using the eclectic grape varieties for which he is well known. The vision is to make cutting-edge wines that reflect the soils and climate they spring from. The tone is deadly serious, a rare departure from the usual “Doonster” shtick.

And bottom line, Graham is a smart guy. He realizes he makes good wines that often get lost in the ocean of other good wines a person could buy. He knows truly great wine sells, regardless of the economic cycle.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but that’s marketing 101.

To find out more about Robert Whitley and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.