



## **Dan Berger on Wine**

**by Dan Berger**

### **Bonny Doon Vintner Waxes Philosophical About Winemaking**

Randall Grahm founded Bonny Doon Vineyard with the idea that he would make wines from Rhone varieties that reflected the wines of that district in southern France.

Over the years, Grahm, who was a philosophy major in college and is blessed with an insatiable curiosity about all the philosophical aspects of wine, has reflected on his choices in life. As Bonny Doon grew more and more successful, Grahm wondered a lot about why he made some of the decisions he had made.

Interviewing him about such matters is an exercise in abstract thought that often leads to fascinating conclusions. In the past two years, Bonny Doon has changed itself into a much smaller company, and Randall was asked about his vision for the winery in the near future.

He said his intention in starting Bonny Doon was to make "wine with soul, which means wine that is different."

Then he explained that there are "two kinds of wines in this world, and one of them is based on the Old World paradigm, which means that the wines amplify the terroir," so that they show characteristics that display some of the soil-derived elements of the vineyard. "The New World paradigm is to attain the highest (Robert) Parker score you can. Period. End of story."

He began to transform Bonny Doon a couple of years ago when he sold two of his largest-selling brands, Cardinal Zin and Big House, for tens of millions of dollars, and shrinking the company. With some of the proceeds, he developed the Pacific Rim winery complex in southern Washington, primarily to make Riesling.

"And then I began looking for an estate where we can do something different," he said. "There are many places where that can be done, but most of them make no economic sense. Is there even a rational reason for doing this? Or am I losing my mind?"

He said some places he has looked at would permit him to make great wine that is most traditional, but "then you end up making a wine that tastes like everyone else's and what's the fun in that? There is no point in making a copy, even a brilliant copy."

Then he mused that he is somewhat of a control freak, and he knows that trait doesn't make for a serene life leading to eventual pulling back and finding the nonworking joy in life.

"I have to figure out, how do I harness my desire to control everything?" Grahm said. "I want to let nature drive, with me in the back seat making suggestions."

All this internalized angst is nothing new for Grahm, who I once described as the James Joyce of wine, only to have him suggest it might be best to use the term James Juice.

When I recalled that episode for him in our most recent meeting, the longhaired, pony-tailed Grahm suggested that if an allusion is appropriate, it would be "the Frank Zappa of wine."

But the best example of a word to describe him is brilliant.

He was one of the first to market wine using intellectual humor based on satire and parody, and much of that from the world of philosophy. His wine labels, shelf-talker cards, and his wildly eclectic newsletter frequently make references to (or are based strictly on) the works of Immanuel Kant, Marcel Proust, Hegel, Plato, and Spinoza.

Indeed, one of his more recent wines is called Critique of Pure Riesling, a play on Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason."

It's been said that the winery newsletter is a pet project that can only be understood by philosophy graduates.

But Grahm goes far beyond that, with stylistic wines that can occasionally call for a lot more explanation than even he can deliver. His also was one of the first U.S. wineries to convert over exclusively to screw caps, eschewing corks. He has made wine from a wide array of obscure grapes as well as varieties that rarely do well in U.S. soils.

Bonny Doon wines are almost uniformly good, including the 2004 Cigare Volant, based on a 1954 French law regarding flying saucers that only Grahm could have parodied. The fine red wine is available nationally, and the complete tale of how the wine got its name is on the back label.

We'll report details on Grahm's quest for an estate site when they are finalized.

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