

Organic wine match of the day: Ca' del Solo Albarino & sashimi

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March 5, 2009 - During the next two weeks your friendly neighborhood Denver Wine Examiner will be reporting from the California coast, beginning with this photo report from Bonny Doon Vineyard -- a little winery that once could, and then did expand to a company of serious productivity (over 450,000 cases five years ago), but has since shrunken down to about 35,000 cases (today), all for one reason: a turning inward, towards **biodynamic** grape growing, and more focused self-sustainability, on the part of Bonny Doon's legendary winemaker/owner, Randall Grahm.



My visit to Bonny Doon's winery in Santa Cruz started with a barrel tasting with associate winemaker, Jillian Johnson, who talked about the reasons behind, and benefits of, Grahm's conversion to biodynamic viticulture: "When you do this, you discover a life force and balance in the grapes, after you break your vineyard's drug addiction to herbicides and pesticides.... the wines become brighter, they have a stronger resistance to oxidation, and they start to express more minerality."

Another telling sign of the healthy grapes coming from Bonny Doon's biodynamic Ca' del Solo Vineyard, according to Johnson, is that "no one wants to work the sorting table (where leaves and miscellaneous debris are removed from just-picked grape bunches when they reach the crush pad) because we're also finding dozens of different types of insects, from white and black spiders to beetles and worms, coming in with the Ca' del Solo grapes... you always know when a vineyard is in balance when you find all the predators (i.e. beneficial animal life) living in there, too."



Since last November, Bonny Doon has also boasted an ultra-cool, new tasting room -- space made available by the shrunken production. In fact, check out the high-drama wood work below, fashioned from staves from deconstructed 2,500 gallon French oak casks that Johnson suddenly found no use of, after winery production shrank down to boutique size.

It was in the booth to the right where we sat, and Johnson tasted me on our *organic wine match of the day*, the **2008 Ca' del Solo Albariño** (about \$19): a crystal-clear, dry white wine with a profusion of fragrances, blooming from the glass with overt suggestions wildflowers, white peach, and green apple, with sub-notes of exotic lychee and lime blossoms; and in the best tradition of this Spanish grape, a medium bodied palate feel enlivened electrical acidity (that is, lighting up the flavors like a hand in the socket).

Now I'm going to tell you something not to get you hot and bothered because you weren't there, but to encourage you to plan your next California trip around a visit to Santa Cruz: because coming out of the

spanking new open kitchen, we also enjoyed some "standard" Doonsville fare: grade A tuna sashimi with a subtle chipotle aioli (a magical match with the Albariño), local grown micro-brussel sprouts with chili oil, a truffle oiled hen of the woods mushroom pizza, a fresh farm egg pizza, topped by some braised broke-da-mouth beef short ribs with celery root purée. In other words, not your ordinary winery tasting room...

Then, it was an hour and a quarter drive south to the Ca' del Solo Vineyard: a pastoral 150 acre property (95 currently planted) located on the eastern slopes of Salinas Valley near Soledad, surrounded by cattle ranches (re the backdrop of pastures below).

Bonny Doon's director of viticulture, Philippe Coderey, wasted no time talking about what he was doing out there: nothing. That is to say, much of biodynamic viticulture really is "doing nothing with nature," and in fact, being as pro-active as possible in returning the environment back to the natural plant and animal life that had previously established a symbiosis with the *terroir*. Hence, the profusion of native grasses between the rows of Ca' del Solo's vines, playing host to literally hundreds of varieties of insects, birds, squirrels, coyotes, and other animal life, who return the favor by helping to establish a healthy environment for the vines to dig deep into the earth to find the minerals necessary for the production of deeper, more complex and sturdy wines.



It's getting late for me, so I won't recount my entire three hour conversation with Monsieur Coderey, except for this way in which he explained the thoughts behind biodynamic viticulture: "Just like us, plants live within natural rhythms of life. Think of it as like inhaling and exhaling. At the end of the harvest, when the sun is descending and we are moving into winter, the earth is inhaling, and the energy is concentrated under the ground, into the soil... and so that is the time when we compost, and when we bury our manure filled cow horns in the field to absorb the energy concentrated into the earth... which is also the time, in the winter, when we stay indoors, eat more root vegetables, and participate in more intellectual activities... which, by the way, is why it's often been said that the roots are the 'head'

of the plant..."

"In the spring, when the sun is ascending, we go outside... and like us, the earth is then exhaling, and all of the energy of nature is pushed above the ground, into the plants and air. Biodynamics is nothing more than connecting plants with these natural rhythms... not only with the sun, but also the moon, which goes from new to full in 14 day cycles, as well as our daily rhythms... we find that when we work to *enhance* the natural rhythms with our various preparations, we produce grapes that produce wines that are more than just 'fruity,' but which are stronger in the taste of minerals and a 'sense of place.'"

Makes sense to me, but hey, I'm not asking you to drink the Kool-aid; but here at the end of 2009's winter, a good wine to exhale with is definitely a Ca' del Solo Albariño... preferably with some grade A tuna sashimi or truffle oiled mushroom pizza!

See the article online: <http://www.examiner.com/x-2207-Denver-Wine-Examiner~y2009m3d6-Organic-wine-match-of-the-day--Ca-del-Solo-Albarino--sashimi?cid=examiner-email>

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