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The Randall Grahmophone

Bonny Doon Vineyard's famous winemaker sounds off in a new book that's part anthology, part confessional.

By Christina Waters

WHILE it may come as no surprise to aficionados of the wit and wisdom long promulgated by vinographer Randall Grahm, this handsome new book from University of California Press will doubtless incite, even irritate, the far-flung empire of wine snobs, honchos and poobahs.

Beautifully designed, loaded with pithy graphics by Alex Gross, colorful labels and lavishly reprinted installments of the infamous Bonny Doon Vineyard newsletter, *Been Doon So Long: A Randall Grahm Vinthology* (University of California Press; 336 pages; \$34.95 hardback) is both a confessional and a response to the author's recent bout of existential self-examination. As is the case with visionaries, Grahm found himself a few years back at a crossroads disguised as an impasse. With labels galore and little of his loudly touted terroir, the once-maverick Rhône Ranger sensed that his mission had come unglued. Having simply had too much fun, he had taken a detour in his rapid ascent and didn't like the place he'd landed. More jester than pre-eminent winemaker, Grahm began to reinvent himself. And the joke among his many devotees and detractors was: reinvent himself--again.

The book directly addresses skeptics in its incisive opening. Here the founder of Bonny Doon Vineyard considers the self-replicating plethora of scattergun varietals with wildly colorful--nay, over-the-top--labels that pretty much abolished any sense of brand identity. He had lost sight of his own prime directive, which was to make wines expressive of their native region.

Despite its tendency to lapse into 19th-century literary tropes, the voice of the book is actually pure Grahm. The relentless, if brilliant, punning might separate the curious from the fan base, but it remains clear, entertaining and occasionally intimate. The entire piece is shot through with Grahm's philosophical leitmotif of winemaking as a language expressing nothing less than the delicious complexity of life itself. The reader need not be a die-hard Grahmaholic to enjoy this loquacious ride, though it helps. But certainly one needs to feel comfortable adrift in a sea of adjectivally driven arcana to best swallow the 310-page exercise in linguaphilia.

In the engaging first chapter, Grahm reveals the karmic accidents (as opposed to strategic planning) that resulted in the ultimately bewildering profusion of labels incarcerated as the "Big House" series. Here's an example of the candid deconstruction. After playing around with some old vines and newfound growers, Grahm confesses that he found himself not with the great grapes of Burgundy--his original grail--but with a passel of mongrels. Faced with the prospect of selling little-known Italian varietals to an audience screaming for chardonnay, Grahm hit upon the melodious rubric "Ca' del solo." If the Ca' del Solo series was a "default program" designed to absorb errors in viticultural



Doon not try this at home: Bonny Doon winemaker Randall Grahm, making magic.

judgment, nonetheless a lucrative star was born. Indeed the Big House label--and, it has to be added, its low price tag--did as much to make Grahm a household name as did his Rhôneish flagship Cigare Volant, with the old-timey flying cigar label.

Still, we learn, the nagging issue of making a serious wine kept the longhaired winemaker awake at night. A large-scale purge ensued. And when the dust had cleared, Grahm himself, a newish and downsized crew, plus the original Soledad vineyard remained. With a biodynamic bee in his bonnet, Grahm initiated a new "sensitive crystallization" label to reflect a new seriousness of purpose. In Grahm's New World order, the wines made in the 21st century, or at least most of them (we are dealing with Randall Grahm, after all), would reflect indigenous terroir (as opposed to Old World Burgundian and Rhône styles) and would be made from the estate in Soledad (except for those that weren't).

The bulk of this elegant book, dedicated to Grahm's longtime collaborator, the savant John Locke, is packed with the inimitable literary explorations, homages and parodies originally perpetrated as newsletters and essays. Through these "word-pictures" Grahm hopes to illustrate "the strange truth that wine conveys through scent and taste."

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