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The Pour

His Big Idea Is to Get Small

By ERIC ASIMOV

SANTA CRUZ, Calif.

RANDALL GRAHM is a changed man, again. But this time he thinks he means it.

Those who have followed him on his 25-odd-year journey as winemaker, jester and all-around philosopher king of Bonny Doon Vineyard have gotten used to the periodic pivots that twist his vinous trajectory like one of Escher's Moebius bands. But then, straight lines never really fit the Bonny Doon aesthetic.

Since its inception in 1983, Bonny Doon often seemed one step ahead of the rest of the California wine industry, yet incapable of prolonged focus. Mr. Graham began with a fascination with pinot noir. He became a leading voice in California promoting Rhone grapes, and then, just as vigorously, touted Italian grapes, the obscurer the better. There was riesling, too, and delicious sweet



Sara Remington for The New York Times

THINKER AND ROGUE Randall Graham is shaking things up at Bonny Doon Vineyard.

wines. At its peak, in 2006, Bonny Doon sold some 450,000 cases of wine, more than 5 million bottles.

But, as anyone so philosophically inclined might wonder, what did it all mean? Mr. Graham, 56, indeed asked himself that question, just a few years ago, and the answer was not satisfying.

"I took stock of my situation," he said, as we sat down recently in the new tasting room of his winery, which, not surprisingly, occupies an old granola factory here in this free-spirited university town. "My wines were O.K., but was I really doing anything distinctive or special? The world doesn't need these wines - I was writing and talking about terroir but I wasn't doing what I was saying. I wanted to be congruent with myself."

What followed was a paring back. Mr. Graham sold off moneymaking labels like Big House and spun off Pacific Rim, under which he sold a lot of riesling. Gone were popular Bonny Doon wines like Old Telegram and, my personal favorite, Clos de Gilroy, a lively, fresh grenache that was as good on a hot summer's day as it was at Thanksgiving. Production has dropped to 35,000 cases.

As Mr. Graham saw it, these may have been profitable wines, but not original wines. All told, the lineup of 35 different wines has been reduced to around 10, still a fair number.

"I know, I know, but what can I do?" Mr. Graham said, throwing up his hands. "Honestly, it doesn't matter whether we make a few wines or a lot of wines. What matters is that we make wines of originality that have a reason for being.

"The question is, how do you create the conditions for originality?"

For Mr. Graham, that means owning a vineyard, embracing biodynamic viticulture and farming without irrigation, as the best Old World vineyards are farmed. "Dry farming is absolutely crucial," he said. "It's more important than anything - biodynamics, schmiodynamics."

The last requirement rules out Bonny Doon's Ca' del Solo vineyard outside Soledad in Monterey County, where it is so dry Mr. Graham is obliged to irrigate. "In retrospect, I shouldn't have planted a vineyard in Soledad, but I did," he said.

Seeking land that could be dry-farmed and that was in driving distance of his base in Santa Cruz (It's my 'hood, and these are my peeps!) brought Mr. Graham to some unusual sites for a new vineyard. He settled on 280 acres on a northeast-facing hillside outside San Juan Bautista, a mission town about 35 miles east of Santa Cruz. It has not been a smooth process, but barring worldwide catastrophe, as Mr. Graham put it, he is due to close on the parcel within a few weeks. He already has goats grazing the land, while a geomancer has helped ease his fear that the site will not have enough water.

"You could say it's just a real estate deal, but it's really been an existential struggle," he said.

With his frizzy, graying hair tied back in a ponytail, his black-rimmed glasses perched slightly askew on his nose, one tip of his shirt collar lapping over the lapel of a rumpled jacket, Mr. Graham looks the part of an aging hippie who found a way to prolong graduate school indefinitely, at someone else's expense.

That's always been part of his roguish appeal - the ability to entertain, to charm, to fascinate and ultimately to get by, with comic wine labels, cosmic puns, rococo satires and elaborately staged publicity stunts. He was the philosopher as ringmaster. He was also contradictory, or perhaps refreshingly honest, speaking reverentially of terroir, yet rarely finding terroir expressed in his own wines, even if they were usually pretty good. Why original wines? Why now?



Sara Remington for The New York Times

In the course of the last six years, since he and his partner, Chinshu Huang, had a daughter, Amélie, their first child, Mr. Graham has had something of a conversion experience. First he had a health crisis, a bout with osteomyelitis, that left him in a haze of IV drugs and wearing a halo brace for three months.

“It was like getting hit by a meteor,” he said. “You realize you take your body for granted and everything else for granted.”

Taking stock of what he had been doing did not leave him feeling particularly proud.



Sara Remington for The New York Times
A dessert wine being poured.

in the Santa Cruz Mountains succumbed to Pierce’s disease, an incurable bacterial disorder.

“It was definitely a loss of mojo at that point,” he said. “I decided I’ll just sit on the sidelines and buy grapes and think awhile.”

Instead, he became a phenomenal negotiant, buying grapes not only from all over California, but from Oregon, and even from France and Germany.

“I think Randall Graham is the smartest winemaker I’ve ever met,” said Jim Clendenen, a fellow larger-than-life California winemaker who owns Au Bon Climat in Santa Barbara County. “The decisions I’ve made based on advice he gave me back in the ’80s have served me very well indeed.”

He recalled in particular Mr. Graham’s observation in the mid-’80s that Americans were so obsessed with chardonnay that a winery could make a lot of money if it produced 80 percent chardonnay and less red wine. It was advice Mr. Clendenen followed, even as Mr. Graham himself never acted on the thought.

“It was the smartest thing I’d ever done,” Mr. Clendenen said. “He didn’t always take his prognosticating as seriously as I did.”

This time, Mr. Graham seems determined to follow his own muse. Standing on the hillside of his prospective vineyard on a crisp, clear afternoon, he

“I actively resorted to all manner of marketing tricks,” he said, as if standing before the congregation to confess.

“I don’t want to rely on winemaking tricks anymore,” he said, enumerating aroma-enhancing yeasts, enzymes and spinning cones among the modern techniques he’s used to change the composition of a wine. “You can’t make an original wine that way. You can make something clever or artful, but not great.”

In a sense, Mr. Graham had been on one big business bender since 1994, when his original Bonny Doon Vineyard



Sara Remington for The New York Times
The tasting room, which has a new use for old storage tanks.

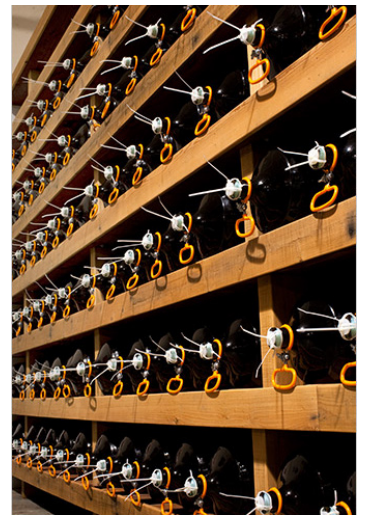
gazed off at the lettuce groves in the valley. “I think this place can make something really distinctive and unusual,” he said. “You have to put your money where your mouth is. Purchased grapes are less risky, but you’re never going to make a vin de terroir.”

Assuming the purchase goes through, it may be six or seven years before Mr. Graham can make wine from the site, leaving him the challenge of making the intervening time feel vital. Still, he has a winery to run. Cash must flow to finance the plan. And in the meantime, he’s got no shortage of fascinations.

He dreams of growing vines from seeds, unheard of in this post-phyloxera era of rootstocks and cuttings and grafts. He is intrigued by wines made in amphorae, as cutting-edge producers are doing in northeastern Italy. There is the ongoing challenge of screwcaps, used on all his wines since 2002. Changing over from cork has presented a different set of unforeseen problems.

“We’re still mastering the screwcap,” he said. “It’s like the sorcerer’s apprentice. It’s extremely powerful technology and you want to channel it in the proper direction.”

Back at the old granola factory, the winery is divided into two segments. In one are wooden puncheons and tanks - conventional looking, at least. In the other cellar, dozens of glass carboys line one wall. Inspired by Emidio Pepe, a producer in Abruzzo who ages his wines in glass for years, Mr. Graham is using the carboys to age a portion of his 2008 Cigare Volant, his southern Rhone blend, to be compared with a similar lot aging in wood.



Sara Remington for The New York Times
Red wine is aged in five-gallon glass bottles.

“This is either going to revolutionize everything we do, or not,” he said. “But I think it will.”

Mr. Graham likes to say that wine is a reflection of the human psyche. No doubt 25 years of whimsical, mercurial wines have been a reflection of his own. Now he is hoping his next adventure will reflect his newfound dedication.

“I’m taking a risk, but it’s a rational risk,” he said. “Maybe it’ll turn out great, maybe not. But I’ll have made a sincere effort to create something new and strange and different, which may be the best you can hope for in the New World.”

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