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TOURING, TASTING AND DINING WITH
BONNY DOON VINEYARD'S RANDALL GRAHM
By Ann Parker - Sentinel correspondent

A special glass of wine is even better with wellpaired food. Add the company of the winemaker -- especially Bonny Doon Vineyard's mercurial Randall Graham -- and you have a full-on experience.



The collaboration of chef Charlie Parker and wine maker Randall Graham is the genius behind Bonny Doon Vineyard's Cellar Door Cafe. (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)

I was happy to hear that Bonny Doon had inaugurated Barrel Tasting and Winemaker Dinners on Thursdays at their Cellar Door Cafe. I was even happier to be invited to experience one of the weekly events.

Even someone with no interest in wine or food should appreciate this Westside venue. Designed by stellar architect Mark Primack, the setting reflects Bonny Doon's eclectic blend of rustic and futuristic icons. Towering ceilings arch over intimate tasting coves, a wine barrel-meetsrocket walkway and a cow horn fountain. Really.

Approximately half of the 3,000-square-foot space is devoted to wine tasting. The Cellar Door Cafe dominates the rest, offering artisan pizzetta, small plates and prix fixe meals featuring organic and biodynamic ingredients, all with suggested wine pairings.

One of the joys of this sophisticated little cafe is watching Executive Chef Charlie Parker -- formerly of acclaimed Manresa restaurant -- practicing his craft in the open kitchen. David Kinch, Manresa's founder, is consulting chef to Cellar Door.

Our tour began with an aperitif sampling of 2008 Vin Gris De Cigare, a lovely rose that Randall Graham cheerfully called "pink wine" as he led our group of 16 into the adjoining winery. In the huge, wood-and-wine scented room filled with French oak barrels, Randall offered his "Reader's Digest version" of Bonny Doon's history, starting in 1981.

"I hoped to make the great American pinot noir," he said. Instead, "exploration, investigation, curiosity"--" and meeting wine luminary Kermit Lynch -- led him much further afield. The result?

"Several years ago, I realized we were the 28th largest winery in the U.S.," said Graham. "Scary -- and not congruent." He described downsizing the company and his desire to make "wines of terroir," vintages that honor the grapes, rather than "wines of effort" reflecting the winemaker's design.

"The coolest thing we're doing now is behind this Wizard of Oz-like curtain," Randall announced, revealing a wall of glass demijohns stacked neatly on their sides behind heavy drapery. The five-gallon jugs were filled with Bonny Doon's flagship red wine, Cigare Volant, "complete with junky leaves," said Graham, representing a technique being used by only one other person.

We couldn't taste the demijohn wine, but Randall drew a generous sample of Cigare Volant 2008 from a conventional wooden barrel, using a pipette "thief." The darkly aromatic wine was rich, earthy and surprisingly smooth.

Back in the café, we joined Randall's partner, Chinshu, and their adorable 6-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Melie, at the long community table where Fiestaware plates made circles of color on the dark surface.

I was eager to sample the food and wine pairings chosen by Graham and Parker. With our first course, Bruschetta of Chickpeas and Bellweather Ricotta, we sipped 2008 Cá del Solo Albariño -- one of three wines Randall tasted with Oprah via Skype on her TV show recently. Oprah liked the lightly citrus wine, and so did we. The subtle flavor and long finish worked beautifully with the grilled flatbread, topped by a multitude of fat garbanzos and creamily refreshing ricotta.

The gorgeous second course featured Seared Line-caught Halibut with Assorted Eggplant and Smoked Fingerling Potatoes. Because I'm allergic to eggplant, the chef substituted assorted roasted squashes, dainty haricot verts and delicately sinful tempura squash blossoms. I was in heaven. This course earned a refined 2007 DEWN Cinsault with 15 percent pinot noir that smoothly supported the moist and meaty fish, acidic vegetables and extraordinarily flavorful smoked potatoes.

The dessert course, a slightly sweet Cornbread with Cigare-Stewed Blueberries and Honey Cream, was matched with 2008 DEWN Vinferno, glowing with hints of apricot and moonlight. We scraped the dessert platter clean; I agreed with my next-chair neighbor Cindy, who said, "I'd like this smothered in sauce."



An order of seared albacore with pork belly and nectarine sits ready on... (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)

Conversation and wine flowed during dinner as we discussed food, wine, travel, favorite restaurants -- and the fact that this \$45 tour and dinner was quite reasonable, especially with

Graham hosting. Although Graham tries to be present on Thursdays, winemaking or grapegrowing staff take over if he's away.

Our group felt like new-made friends as the event wound down. From across the table, Charles summed up the evening when he said thoughtfully, "It was different and distinctive -- with Randall's ambiance."

Ann Parker welcomes your comments, feedback and suggestions about reviews for area restaurants. Contact her at atparker@pacbell.net

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Randall Graham turns another colorful page on the world of wine

It's official. Randall Graham's 'Been Doon So Long' -- a collection of essays, literary parodies, song lyrics and poems by the irrepressible winemaker and philosopher -- is slated for release mid-September. Signed copies of the book, published by UC Press, should soon be available soon at Bookshop Santa Cruz and Bonny Doon's Westside tasting room. Says Graham, 'It is a collection of Dooniana of the last 20 some odd years, and take it from me, some of the years were odder than others'

If You Go

The Cellar Door Cafe

WHERE: 328 Ingalls St., Santa Cruz

CAFE HOURS: 5:30 p.m.-9 p.m. lunch and dinner Wednesday-Thursday; noon-9 p.m. lunch and dinner Friday-Sunday; prix fixe meals, \$32 per person for three courses, available starting at 5:30 p.m. Cafe is closed Monday-Tuesday.

TASTING ROOM HOURS: Noon-5:30 p.m., Monday-Tuesday; noon-9 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday; call 425-4518 for details.

EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES: Wine tasting: \$7 per person, applied toward \$35 or more purchase. Private wine tasting: \$15-\$20 per person, tasting with wine ambassador. Private wine and food tasting: \$40 per person, with wine ambassador and Chef Charlie Parker. Group tasting: \$7-\$12 per person, depending on size of group. Reservations: 425-6750. Price Wednesdays: Bottle of wine half-price with food purchase. Barrel Tasting and Winemaker Dinner Thursdays: \$40-\$45 per person. Hosted three-course, prix fixe, family-style meal. Reservations advised.

DETAILS: 831.425.6771, www.bonnydoonvineyard.com