

SANTACRUZ. magazine

Spring 2009

When
surfing
came to
Santa Cruz

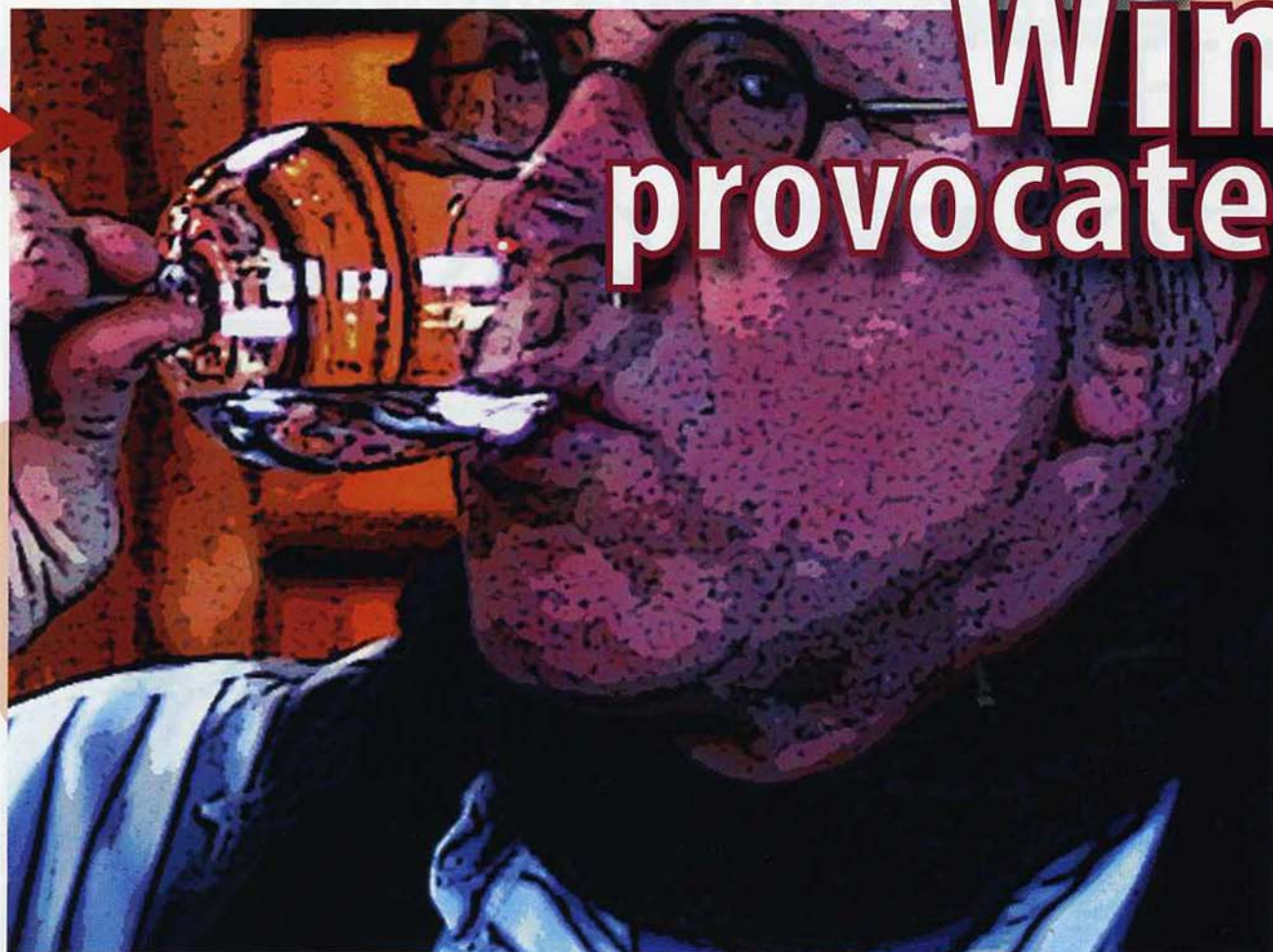
Living in a
house
made of
straw

**Randall
Grahm**
wine
provocateur



What a Fine Romance
Love is just a beach walk away

Wine provocateur



Bonny Doon wines reflect owner's Santa Cruz sensibilities

By Stacey Vreeken

Randall Graham, owner of Bonny Doon Vineyard, is known throughout the wine world as a provocateur. He delights in creating wines that defy expectations, marketing them with a goofy verve that amuses both the mind and the palate.

Recently, Graham further defied expectations by spinning off the popular Cardinal Zin and Big House Red labels, planting some grapes in Washington and moving out of namesake Bonny Doon to open a nautilus-shaped tasting room on the West

side of Santa Cruz.

This is a winemaker who turns down a sure thing in an effort to stay nimble and creative.

"I'm not sure anyone else would have me. If I lived in Napa, I'd be driven out on a rail. In Europe, I'd be in jail," says Graham with a twinkle in his eye.

Is there any other way?

Well, he could have cashed in and left Santa Cruz far behind.

"I'm not sure anyone else would have me. If I lived in Napa, I'd be driven out on a rail. In Europe, I'd be in jail," says Graham with a twinkle in his eye.

Graham is as devoted to Santa Cruz as its

residents are proud to claim him as a successful original.

"Living in Santa Cruz has informed my sensibility," Graham says. Raised in Los Angeles, he attended UC Santa Cruz and, like many, decided to stick around this offbeat enclave by the sea.

"So much of what we do (at Bonny Doon) embodies Santa Cruz: Its ethos, psyche, the curiosity, idealism, innocence. All those quintessential Santa Cruz traits."

You could be describing Graham's wines: Artsy, eclectic, a lack of pretension. "This ain't Napa by a long shot," he says.

Instead, he enjoys hiking in Big Basin or Henry Cowell parks, taking his 5-year-old daughter Amelie to see the butterflies at Natural Bridges beach, trekking up to Ano Nuevo every couple of years and enjoying the cuisine at Avanti, Omei, Soif and Gabriella Cafe.

So entranced was Graham with Sean

PHOTOGRAPHS SHMUEL THALER

Baker of Gabriella's that he asked the chef to design his menu at the new tasting room and to create an exclusive wine-pairing menu.

Graham is tied into the rhythms of Santa Cruz, which feed his creativity.

"Every morning, I go to Lulu's at the Octagon... I'm so habituated to doing it. I love the uninterrupted time and space. As the caffeine works into your system, you wake up and write," he says.

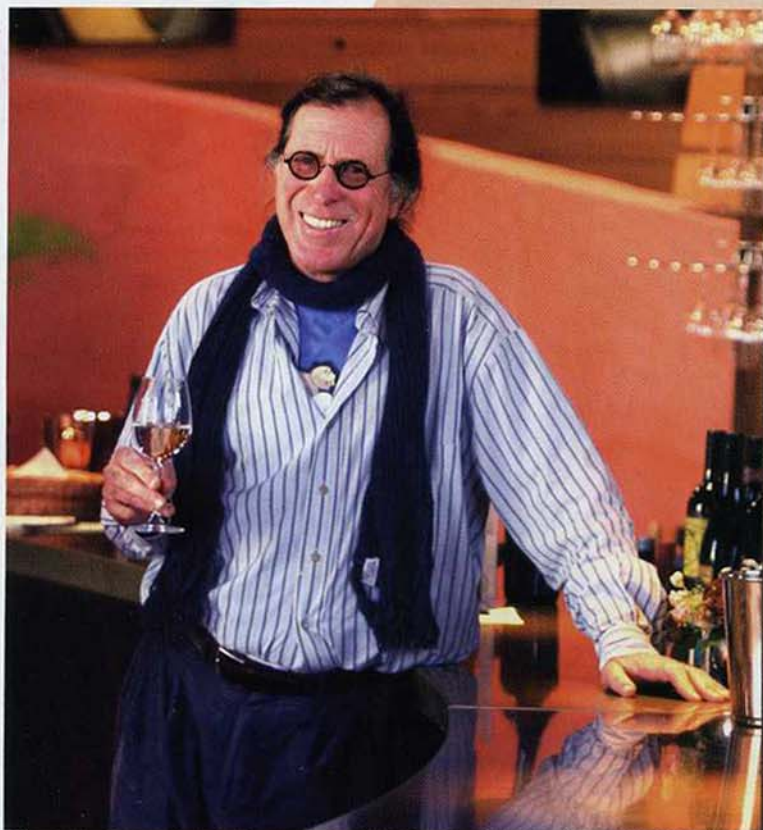
Graham loves writing, reading, alternative

Graham thrives on their differences, enjoying life and the time to reflect on how he's living it.

"I have to ask myself, why do I make wine or grow grapes? To fulfill my fantasy of what a vineyard or wine should be like? Do I have the maturity, wisdom, judgment to grow grapes true to the vineyard?"

Staying true

Getting the right grapes flourishing in



Randall Graham is like Santa Cruz: artsy, eclectic, unpretentious.

health, studying topics such as the nature of reality and how the brain works. He loses himself in the world of ideas.

This head-in-the-clouds thinking allows him to transition from making wine to writing about it, to thinking of new ways to grow grapes, which are really old ideas rediscovered.

Graham is also smart enough to surround himself with a cadre of grounded people that keep the ship running. Captain of that vessel would have to be his partner Chinshu from Taiwan.

"People who are organized is semi-miraculous to me," he says in the case of opposites attracting. Chinshu puts her previous experience at Hewlett-Packard to use keeping his private life running, raising their daughter while also taking a lively interest in the performing arts.

the right soil with the right climate is the Holy Grail of growing grapes.

Graham is a man who fully commits to his enthusiasms and right now it's terroir, a French term referring to grapes and wine that reflect the taste of the soil or region they're produced in.

"If it works, wine doesn't need to be manipulated," says Graham, disdaining modern winemaking techniques. "Let nature do the heavy lifting."

Graham's old school. In fact, he's ancient history, embracing biodynamics as the oldest/newest way to grow grapes.

Grapes at his Ca del Solo vineyard in Monterey are being grown using biodynamic techniques, which means little or no irrigation, cover crops and encouraging the soil to nurture plants and plants to reach out to the soil. This can mean planting, pruning and

A TASTE OF DOON

Bonny Doon Vineyards, which had a tasting room on Pine Flat Road in Bonny Doon for 25 years, has slid down the hills with a splash to land at the Swift Street Complex on Santa Cruz's Westside.

A new, lavish tasting room built with wood from wine casks in the shape of a nautilus now dominates the back corner, offering three tasting bars and a food-and-wine pairing menu.

"I had a dream of a nautilus," says Randall Graham of the collaboration between local architect Mark Primack and a Dutch design firm.

The space originally was a bottling line, but as Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard took over the adjacent space in a collective with other wineries, Graham decided to keep some of the space and join the party.

The move away from the rural tasting room, which was taken over by Beauregard Vineyards, mirrors Graham's move away from Bonny Doon-grown grapes to concentrate on biodynamically grown grapes from a variety of sources. Graham also has focused on small production estate varietals such as dolcetto and nebbiolo, while keeping his signature Le Cigare red and white blends.

The tasting room, reflecting his personality and beliefs, unfolds in cells, or pods, with a main area, a biodynamic tasting room and an area where you can purchase food from a menu to match the wines. Members of the Bonny Doon wine club can also pick up selections there, avoiding shipping charges.

Graham points out the many factors at play when tasting wine that have nothing to do with the wine itself.

"When you taste wine, you're tasting your own physiology, affected by your mood, whether you're hydrated, the atmosphere, temperature, the phases of the moon," he says.

He says there are days when he doesn't even like his own wines; and conversely days he loves it. "You have to be careful not to rush to judgment. You have to taste it over and over again," he says.

Setting itself apart from the more simple tasting room of its neighbors, Bonny Doon offers samples for \$7 per person or a private tasting with a "wine ambassador" for \$20-\$30, depending on wines.

For \$40, you are seated in a private pod and guided through a tasting of four wines paired with foods designed by Chef Sean Baker to emphasize the wine.

"I was so knocked out by his food, he was the logical candidate," says Graham.



The Bonny Doon Vineyard tasting room has the curved shapes of nature.

harvesting according to root, leaf, flower and fruit cycles, taking into account the influence of sun, moon and stars.

"There is interaction with plants and animals and all the rest of the celestial bodies," says Graham.

Yes, Graham believes in astrology, though he prefers to call it astronomy, saying a bit dryly, "There's the belief that the Earth doesn't act on its own."

The idea of interconnectedness goes back to philosophy and science reflected in the design of wine labels featuring enlarged crystals and the design of the tasting room with its curves and private tasting "pods."

The natural style of winemaking results in vintages that emphasize mineral tastes ("I'm a mineral freak") and regional character, just the way they make it in the Old World.

Graham's favorites are the Rhone styles of wine, and he thinks New World wines just

haven't got it figured out yet.

"It's the ability of the wine to be itself -- to clearly transmit, to convey a sense of place. In the New World, we don't know the quality of what to express. We haven't discovered it yet," he says.

Maybe this is why Graham wouldn't be so popular in Napa. He puts another nail in the coffin.

"We reverse engineer wine to get the outcome we're looking for... there's a soul extracting aspect to it."

Instead, Graham is looking for convergence. "Co-evolution. Where over time, these grapes like it here."

Using biodynamic practices, grapevines acclimate and evolve just as they did over thousands of years in Europe.

Maybe Graham will figure out a way to be around to sip it. Meanwhile, we'll enjoy his efforts in this world. 🍷

PASSPORT TO WINE

A \$40 Passport from the Santa Cruz Mountain Winegrowers Association allows you to explore the diverse wine appellation that spans the Santa Cruz Mountains. At each winery you visit, a page of your passport will be given a unique commemorative stamp. You must have your passport with you in order to participate in the tasting.

Passport benefits are good for one visit to each participating winery and are for use on designated days only. Passports do not expire until each winery has been visited once.

Passport wineries will be open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. the third Saturday of January, April,

July and November, as well as during their regular hours. Some of the wineries are not open to the public except on Passport Days and many pour special wines or offer barrel samples on these days. Many of these wines are not available anywhere else.

During Passport Day, you can also enjoy waived corkage on Santa Cruz Mountains Wines or 10 percent off on dinner at local participating restaurants, such as Ma Maison or Michael's on Main.

Purchase a Passport by calling 685-8463. Each passport covers tasting room fees for one person at all participating wineries and is valid until completed.

WINES OF THE WESTSIDE

One of the most welcome additions to the Santa Cruz wine scene has been the concentration of tasting rooms off Swift Street on the Westside. Now instead of winding through miles of mountain roads, though charming in its own right, you can visit more than six tasting rooms in one spot.

With a cluster of trendy shops, Kelly's Bakery and the ocean nearby, the Westside is the place to be these days.

Most of the tasting rooms organize themselves under the umbrella of Surf City Vintners, which centralizes information about the tasting hours and wines poured and also allows the wineries to support each other. Since these guys are more friends than competitors, it makes sense.

Wineries participating in the group included Pelican Ranch, Sones Cellars, VINO Tabi, Dragonfly Cellars, Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, Trout Gulch Vineyard and Equinox Champagne Cellar.

"It's working really well and it has to do with tasting rooms nearby. It's fun to have immediate feedback," says winemaker Jeff Emory of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard.

"It's definitely a family. We all hang out. We loan each other things. When I need an extra hand they help me out. It's a good collaboration and support but we are all doing our own thing," says Denis Hoey of Dragonfly Cellars. Hoey is also assistant winemaker at Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard.

Here's a rundown on when the wineries are open and what they offer. Wineries are along Ingalls Street in the Swift Street Complex.

PELICAN RANCH, noon-5 p.m. Friday through Sunday. Call (831) 426-6911.

SONES CELLARS, noon-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Call (831) 420-1552.

VINO TABI WINERY, noon-5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, noon-6 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Call (408) 813-8384.

DRAGONFLY CELLARS, by appointment and special event weekends. Call (831) 566-5147.

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAIN VINEYARD, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays, 1-5 p.m. Sunday. Call for Friday hours. Call 426-6209.

TROUT GULCH, Passport Saturday, Vintners Festival and by appointment. Call (831) 471-2705.

EQUINOX CHAMPAGNE CELLAR, noon-5 p.m. Saturday and Sundays and Friday. Call 423-3000. noon-5 p.m. Call (831) 423-3000.