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BONNY DOON VINEYARD'S RANDALL GRAHM MAKES A BID TO BE KNOWN FOR WINES, NOT WACKINESS

By Laurie Daniel
for the Mercury News

Bonny Doon Vineyard founder Randall Grahm is continually reinventing his wines and his winery. He started Bonny Doon in 1981 with the aim of making great pinot noir. When the wine fell short of his expectations, he turned to Rhone grape varieties and became known as one of the original Rhone Rangers.

Three years ago, he sold off the very successful Big House and Cardinal Zin brands; he later downsized the winery even more by dropping some wines, like Clos de Gilroy, from his lineup.

When all was said and done, Bonny Doon had gone from a 450,000-case winery to one producing 35,000 cases a year.

Now he's beginning yet another reinvention. Grahm recently completed the purchase of 250 rolling acres of grassland, oak trees and poison oak near San Juan Bautista, where he plans to plant 80 to 100 acres of vines and eventually build a winery. And with the new vineyard, he'll be coming full circle: When he starts planting this year, the first vines will be six acres of pinot noir.

Even for someone like Grahm, the changes of the past few years have been considerable. But one day he realized that he had become better known as an irreverent guy who developed wacky labels than as a producer of fine wine. Bonny Doon was successful, but it wasn't the kind of success Grahm was looking for.

"If I were to die soon," he says, "they would say, 'He was a great marketer,' and that's not acceptable." Grahm realized that he wanted to do something of substance and "produce wines that have originality."

In addition to downsizing the winery, an important step was to focus more on a 95-acre Soledad vineyard he had acquired in 1992, when his vineyard in Bonny Doon was dying from Pierce's disease, a bacterial infection spread by insects. Inspired by some winemaker friends in Europe, Grahm decided to adopt biodynamic farming principles - which are similar to organic practices but incorporate a belief in the influence of cosmic and terrestrial forces. The goal, he says, was to produce balanced wines "with more life force."

He hired viticulture director Philippe Coderey, who had worked with biodynamic vintner Michel Chapoutier in the northern Rhone, to guide the biodynamic program in Soledad and work with the growers who supply grapes to Bonny Doon. The Soledad vineyard, known as the Ca' del Solo vineyard, was certified biodynamic in 2007.

The new property in San Juan Bautista will offer Grahm the chance to develop a biodynamic property from the ground up. One aspect to that is creating a farm that grows more than just grapes. "I don't want it to be a monoculture, so we'll look at some sort of interesting companion plants," he says.

As for the grapes, the mix is shaping up to be - not surprisingly - eclectic. When I visited the property with him last spring, Grahm still hadn't worked out which varieties to plant. His plan had been to "find a place that's good for grapes, then figure out what to do." Now he's looking at reds such as grenache, syrah, sagrantino, tannat and ruche, in addition to pinot, and, for the whites, roussanne, grenache blanc, petit manseng and grenache gris.

"What's important," he says, "is to try to do something original, something to do justice to the site."

When Grahm was looking for property, he wanted a site where he could farm without irrigation, because he believes dry farming gives the wines "a level of purity" and "a lot more life force." The soils, he says, are interesting - some limestone and enough clay for good water-holding capacity, but he admits he's not sure whether dry farming will be feasible.

"I'm hopeful," he says. "Even if we don't succeed, we're going to try it."

Although Grahm still makes some unusual, small-production wines for his wine club, the core lineup has been streamlined considerably. Under the Ca' del Solo label, there is a pair of standout whites: the **2008 Albarino** (\$20), which is crisp and fragrant, with white peach and some floral notes, and the **2008 Muscat** (\$18), which is very fragrant and floral, with white stone fruit and a note of lime peel.

There's also a good **2006 Ca' del Solo Nebbiolo** (\$30), a red grape that is the star of Italy's Piedmont region but hasn't performed very well in California. This one will never be mistaken for Barolo, but it's lively and structured, with cherry flavors accented by notes of tobacco and rose petals.

Under the Bonny Doon label, the flagship is the red southern-Rhone-style blend called **Le Cigare Volant**. The 2005 (\$32) - which is mostly grenache, with some mourvedre and syrah and a touch of carignane and cinsault - is dark and peppery, with ripe berry and firm structure. I'm also a fan of the **2006 Bonny Doon "Le Pousseur" Syrah** (\$18), which is peppery and bright, with ample berry flavors and good balance.

All the Bonny Doon wines are sealed with screw caps, and I find that the reds usually benefit from some air. Consider decanting them.

If you want to check out the latest Bonny Doon wines, visit the tasting room at 328 Ingalls St. in Santa Cruz. The room, which has the feel of an airy, spacious wine barrel, is open daily except for major holidays.

The tasting room also has a cafe that serves small plates and a fixed-price family-style dinner menu Wednesday through Sunday.

For more information, go to www.bonnydoonvineyard.com

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