

Individuality achieved

Bonny Doon wines reflect Randall Grahm's passion for the art

■ BY MIKE DUNNE
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Randall Grahm rises from his place at the head of the table, picks up a bottle of wine and starts to pour.

It's a cold white wine made from an obscure strain of the muscat grape, grown in his vineyard at Soledad along the east side of Salinas Valley.

"By definition, muscat is perfect. It does what it's supposed to do," says Grahm.

While that isn't the most poetic, profound or provocative thing Grahm has said, it is vintage Grahm — assured and stimulating.

Since founding his winery, Bonny Doon Vineyard, in the Santa Cruz Mountains in 1981, Grahm has been one of the state's more entertaining and creative wine folks.

At Ella Dining Room & Bar on K Street in downtown Sacramento, he presided over a lunch to introduce his latest releases to a small group of local wine retailers and restaurateurs.

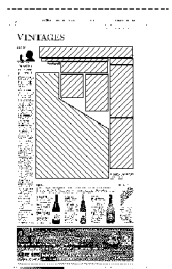
Grahm's hair is still surfer-long, but thinner than when he established Bonny Doon, of which he remains president for life.

He's slimmed down, too, and his tone as he talks is more soothing than edgy.

But while he may be less intense, he's no less passionate about what he's doing, which these days involves advocating the principles of biodynamic viticulture, consolidating his energies and resources, nurturing his 5-year-old daughter Amélie, and continuing his pursuit of the ultimate wine.

Occasionally, he indicates wistfully that he is all too aware of his mortality. This helps explain why he's cut his production from 450,000 cases annually to 35,000.

This fall, he will sever his final tie to the Santa Cruz Mountains when he closes the Bonny Doon tasting room at the site of his original winery. His



production now is concentrated in Santa Cruz and Soledad, but he continues to scout the state for a site he hopes will yield his ultimate wine – a wine that expresses with originality, soulfulness and focus a sense of place.

Bonny Doon had grown too big, he suggests, diverting him from the “cosmic questions” (“How do I make a great wine before I die?”) and the “core essences” (“Terroir, and how precious it is.”).

“My actions weren’t congruent with my speech. It became necessary to make them the same,” says Graham.

Whether due to an esoteric winemaking tool called “sensitive crystallization,” the naturalistic practices of biodynamic farming or simply more time to spend on grape growing and winemaking, Graham’s Bonny Doon wines perhaps more than ever reward consumers with their individuality and clarity.

He’s mastering several of the more challenging grapes to face California vintners.

The Bonny Doon Vineyard Ca’ Del Solo 2005 San Benito County Sangiovese (14.5 percent alcohol; \$15) is an unusually rich and viscous take on the varietal.

The Bonny Doon Vineyard Ca’ Del

Solo 2005 Monterey County Nebbiolo (13.5 percent alcohol; \$30) is at once juicy, balanced and powerful.

And even Graham speculates that the Bonny Doon Vineyard 2005 Santa Maria Valley Bien Nacido Syrah (13.6 percent alcohol; \$40) may be his “most stellar achievement,” combining a ripe and earthy fruitiness with spiciness.

And no surprise here, but the current release of his long-standing tribute to the rich blends of France’s Rhone Valley, the Bonny Doon Vineyard 2004 California Le Cigare Volant (13.5 percent alcohol; \$30), again is vivacious with strawberry fruit, truffles and silk.

As to the Bonny Doon Vineyard Ca’ Del Solo 2007 Monterey County Muscat (12.5 percent alcohol; \$17) with which he introduced lunch, the wine is all about the relaxed and convivial pleasures of summer.

Or as he would put it: “Muscat should be a flower in a glass. Aromatherapeutic activity should be going on. It should be calming. It should induce a sense of peace and well-being.”

Call The Bee’s Mike Dunne at (916) 321-1143.