

The New York Times

The Pour

Eric Asimov

APRIL 21, 2009, 3:04 PM

Read the article online:

<http://thepour.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/21/the-wines-behind-the-man/?emc=eta1>

The Wines Behind the Man

In my column this week I profile Randall Grahm, the winemaker, raconteur and philosopher king of [Bonny Doon Vineyard](#).

It's a fascinating story, I think, of a guy who's been through many changes as a winemaker. He has been very influential pushing Rhone and Italian grapes in California. He's promoted screwcaps and truth in labeling. He has done a great deal to diminish the pomp and pretension that so often envelops wine. But at the end of the day, or at least after 20 years or so in the business, he might have best been remembered as an extraordinary marketer.

After several life-changing events, Mr. Grahm decided he needed to make a change. The discord between preaching the joys of terroir wines, and the essentially mass-market wines he was making, became too much for him to bear. He decided to sell significant parts of his company, cut back on production and do whatever he could to make wines that were, as he puts it, distinctive and unusual.

He's buying a big parcel of land, where he will plant a vineyard, but it's a big expenditure and a big risk. "Instead of being a great marketer, I want to really give it the old college try," he told me.

Strangely enough, in the column I talk very little about his wines. So I want to follow up here on the wines that Mr. Grahm is making now.

I have to say, I have not drunk a lot of Bonny Doon wines in the last 10 or 15 years. I remember in the late 1980's I would get excited to see Bonny Doon wines on a list, though I couldn't always afford them. Le Cigare Volant, the signature southern Rhone-style red, was a favorite.

But I got less excited in the 1990's. In fact my favorite Bonny Doon wine of recent years was Clos de Gilroy, an inexpensive fresh and lively California grenache that was delicious slightly chilled, like a Beaujolais. Clos de Gilroy disappeared in the company reorganization.

Tasting through the Bonny Doon lineup with Mr. Graham and on my own, I found I really liked the whites, especially those produced from Mr. Graham's Ca' del Solo vineyard in the Salinas Valley of Monterey County. Two wines I particularly liked were the 2008 Ca' del Solo albariño and the 2008 Ca' del Solo muscat. These are typical Bonny Doon wines in the obscurity of the grapes and in the sincerity of the presentation.

Sincerity? From a marketing genius like Mr. Graham? Well, I think sincerity is what Graham is after now, from the honest listing of ingredients on wines labels (beginning in 2007) to the renunciation of winemaking tricks like designer yeasts, enzymes, spinning cones and other elements that are typical of modern wine production.

The albariño is lively and crisp, zesty and delicious, with flavors of minerals and citrus and a tangy acidity that makes you want to keep drinking it. You don't see much albariño in California, but this wine is a terrific example, and a good value at \$20.

You don't see much muscat either, and a wine like this makes me wonder why. It's wonderfully aromatic, in a musky, canteloupe, honeydew sort of way, and though it has a bit of residual sugar in it, the wine is balanced and almost seems dry.

I prefer both of these wines to Bonny Doon's White Rhone blend, Le Cigar Volant Blanc, which is made out of roussanne and grenache blanc. This wine is made from purchased grapes and, through several vintages, I didn't taste the same sort of liveliness that I got from the Ca' del Solo wines.

I only tasted a few of Graham's reds. I especially liked a 2005 Le Pousseur syrah, made from purchased Central Coast grapes. It's a very young, dense wine that has definite Rhonish qualities of smoke, pepper and bacon fat but still needs some time to develop. Mr. Graham makes a Ca' del Solo nebbiolo, which I tasted out of wood tanks – light-bodied, floral and grippy. I look forward to tasting that in a few years too.

I've tasted the 2005 Le Cigar Volant with Mr. Graham a couple of times and each time it has seemed closed and inexpressive, to Mr. Graham's frustration.

"The thing about wine," he said, "if you're truly honest with yourself, is that some days a wine tastes good, other days bad."

I think he's right about that, which is one of the things that makes rating wines a hazardous business. Really, when you are tasting, you are capturing a moment in a wine's evolution, and if the wine is a living thing, as good wines are, it will change.

Here are a few other things I learned about Bonny Doon wines and Randall Graham. He typically puts neutral oak chips into his red wines when they are fermenting, not to add flavor, he said, but to stabilize the color. "I think of it as a really benign use of oak," he

said. Personally, I don't much care about a stable color but, as winemakers have told me again and again, the marketplace does.

As an indication of his dual nature as an eccentric wine visionary and a smart businessman, Mr. Grahm drives two cars: a 2002 Porsche 911, kind of a typical ride for a Silicon Valley type, and a 1972 [Citroën DS-21](#) which to my mind is one of the coolest cars every made.

One of the things I appreciate most about Mr. Grahm is that he embraces ambiguity. He's not afraid to acknowledge that a wine is good but could have been better, or to allow that not every site where he gets grapes is great. He has been without a doubt an aggressive marketer in his career, but always with a sense of humor – a tremendous saving grace – and, not so common, an honest one.