

Food & wine

Offbeat winemaker rethinks his approach

Grahm infuses vineyards with organics and mysticism

Randall Grahm officially calls himself "President for Life" of Bonny Doon Vineyard in Santa Cruz, Calif. But a more apt title would be "Supreme Seeker/Philosopher/Gadfly/Court Jester."

Over the course of a quarter-century, he has become famous partly for making excellent and popular wine but mostly for puncturing wine-world pretentiousness and embracing offbeat causes that invariably wind up in the mainstream. He shuns making Chardonnays and Cabernets in favor of wines made from once obscure or unpopular grapes such as Syrah, Grenache, Albarino and Riesling. He packaged those wines with witty labels

Sips

By Jerry Shriver

depicting Zinfandel-spewing priests, UFOs and prison-break scenes and wording with literary allusions and outrageous puns. His was the first major American winery to bottle all of its products with screw caps — and the only one to stage a public wake for corks.

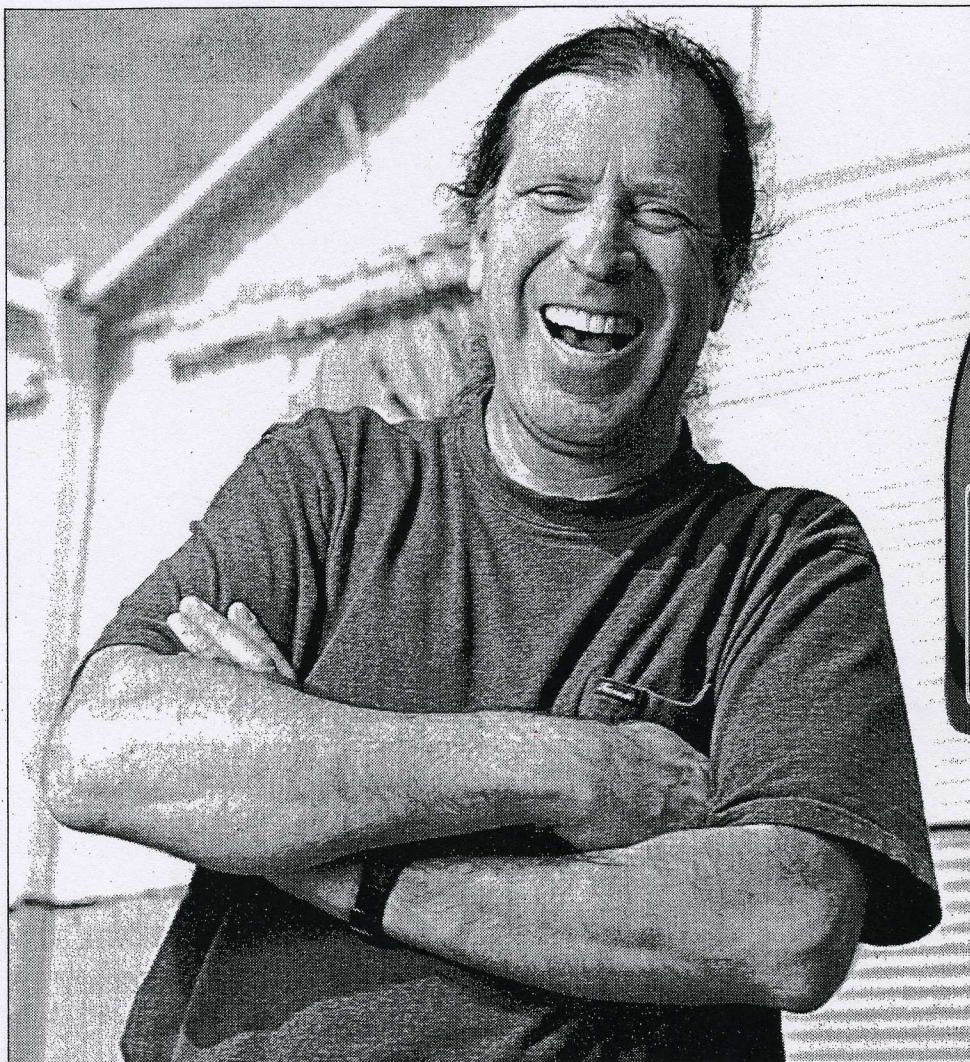
So when he announces he is plowing ahead with a major rethinking of his approach to winemaking, it pays to drink up and listen.

"It's time to focus, time to buckle down," says Grahm, 54, during a recent stop in New York, where he's shopping a proposal for a book that would include writings from his famously satirical and zany newsletters.

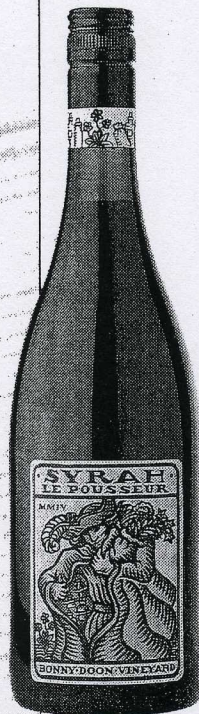
The closely linked subjects of that focus are a rededication to the classic Old World concept of *terroir* — making wines that express the characteristics of a specific place — and a full-scale embracing of the rapidly growing biodynamic agriculture movement — the approach to farming that mixes aspects of organics and mysticism to make vineyards more harmonious with their natural surroundings.

"Biodynamics is about trying to find the individual character of a site," he says. "I'm really trying to produce more life force in my wines, and that changes everything you do."

The old model, in which he made most of his wines from purchased



By Alex Krause, Bonny Doon Vineyards



By Leslie Smith Jr., USA TODAY

Sip this:
Bonny Doon's
2004 Syrah
Le Pousseur
for \$18.

Going out on a grapevine: Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon Vineyard in Santa Cruz, Calif., says he is "really trying to produce more life force in my wines."

grapes, "wasn't sustainable emotionally or spiritually for me. Ultimately, it was a big 'So what?' I was squandering my gifts. I want to make wine that makes the world better. Now I have to figure out how to do that."

He began last year by selling off two of his popular large-production brands, Cardinal Zin and Big House, and creating a separate company for his Riesling-centric Pacific Rim brand and moving it to Washington state. Those moves cut his annual production from 450,000 cases to 35,000 cases, and his staff from 100 to 35.

Now, most of the grapes that go into his Bonny Doon and Ca' del Solo wines eventually will come from his own vineyards. Over the past five years, he has farmed more of his land biodynamically, and this spring he received official

certification for 120 acres near Soledad, Calif. He plans to buy at least 125 acres in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and he hopes to be making all of his wines from estate-grown biodynamic fruit within about six years.

"You have to have the wit to figure out that piece of land and what to do with it. That's my existential crisis. Your job is to reveal the *terroir* and not screw things up too bad."

He says he's not worried about the commercial potential for his wines, even though they'll likely cost more than those from the brands he sold off and certainly will taste far different from the highly extracted, high-alcohol fruit bombs that are in vogue in California. "If a wine is great, it will sell," he says.

Grahm concedes that the public views biodynamic agriculture as "a

fringe-oddity thing" but notes that organic produce was once considered weird as well. "I think biodynamics will get to another level of sophistication. (That will happen) when people learn that the produce has properties that make you feel better — not just an absence of poisons, but things that make you feel better."

To get a sense of where the Supreme Seeker is headed, check out some of these wines (www.bonnydoonvineyard.com), all of which incorporate some biodynamically farmed grapes:

- 2003 Bonny Doon Le Cigare Volant, \$28
- 2004 Bonny Doon Syrah Le Pousseur, \$18
- 2004 Ca' del Solo Nebbiolo, \$30
- 2005 Ca' del Solo Sangiovese, \$15