

WINES & VINES

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Winemaker Interview

Innovator discusses impact of packaging on brand perception
By Laurie Daniel

With his playful labels and witty newsletters, Randall Graham developed a well-deserved reputation as an innovative marketer of Bonny Doon Vineyard and Ca' del Solo wines. But his innovations have also had a serious side. He was, for example, an early adopter of screwcaps for his entire product line -- a risky move, but one that he trumpeted in typical Graham style with a mock funeral for the cork, in the persona of Thierry Bouchon (a play on the French words for corkscrew). He also has been at the forefront of ingredient labeling -- listing both ingredients and processing agents on all his wines.

Lately Graham has chafed under the "great marketer" sobriquet, and he's taken steps to refocus his Santa Cruz winery on smaller-production wines made from grapes that are grown Biodynamically. He sold off the Big House and Cardinal Zin brands in 2006, radically cutting his production. Graham also moved away from most of the wacky labels, though he still hasn't gotten too conventional: Labels on the Ca' del Solo wines from his estate vineyard now include a "sensitive crystallization" of that particular cuvée, an image Graham sees as a sort of portrait of the wine's life force.



Wines & Vines: You're well known for being an early California advocate of screwcaps, eventually putting your entire production under the Stelvin closure. Why did you decide to abandon corks?

Randall Graham: My migration away from corks in the late '90s was principally due to the enormous issues I was observing with TCA, or cork taint. I never had an entire batch of my own wine tainted by TCA, but the level of incidence was unacceptably high. We began using Supremecorq closures for our lower-end wines, and observed reasonably good results, but ultimately found that closure was not really appropriate for age-worthy wines. It was certainly a gross misstep on our

part to bottle our '97 and '98 Le Cigare Volant with synthetic closures, as the wines showed signs of premature development, and this led us to look for other solutions. We began with Stelvin for our 2001 Big House Red and were exceptionally pleased with the results. That has led us to move to bottling our entire range in Stelvin, beginning with the '02 vintage.

W&V: What was the reaction among consumers to your move to screwcaps? Are you happy with how the closure has performed?

Graham: Well, as you know, when we began the initiative with Big House, it was by no means certain that there would be instant universal acceptance. We mounted an extraordinary public relations initiative to educate the public on the virtues of screwcaps, including the infamous wake for M. Thierry Bouchon. (I still pinch myself that I was able to enlist Jancis Robinson in this initiative.)

Amazingly, we did not find nearly as much resistance to screwcaps as one might have imagined. Maybe this was just our population of customers at the time, or perhaps there had been a real change in the zeitgeist. Or maybe, more cynically, no one seems to really care that much one way or another.

But I am very happy with the performance of screwcaps in general and have found that there are features -- chiefly the more oxygen-exclusionary aspect -- of them that are even cooler than I understood at the time. Yes, one has to be careful about the wine staying in the backward "reductive" phase too long post-bottling, especially if you are intending to sell it or have it reviewed while it is still in this phase. And there are things that can be done to mitigate this tendency, chiefly by using lower levels of SO₂. But the fact that you can achieve a sort of mini-reductive phase in bottle can be made to serve the wine -- creating potentially much greater levels of complexity, as well as enhancing its ultimate longevity.

W&V: Are there other closures you would consider?

Graham: For the moment, Stelvin seems far and away the best possibility, though in the future (when we can sell wine for very high prices), I'd like to look at the possibility of someone creating a custom glass ampoule bottle for us (a total hermetic seal). That would be the coolest.

W&V: How would a consumer open it?

Graham: You break the glass. This is a little bit dangerous, I'm told, and hospitals have generally moved away from ampoules. Our product liability insurance would likely go through the roof, which might enable us to (partially) justify the crazy price we would charge for the bottle.

W&V: For years, you were known for the witty, sometimes wacky, labels you put on your wines. You appear to have gotten away from that sort of label, with the possible exception of the wines you bottle for your DEWN club. Why?

Graham: I am going to wine hell for what I have wrought in the way of wacky labels. I still, of course, have a slightly wacky side, which likely is not going to go away, but I think that the totally crazy labels have perhaps not served us well as far as the perception of the brand. I really would like people to take the wines more seriously, and know that I am myself far more focused and serious. (Maybe a new wine label called, "This Time I'm Serious?")

W&V: Your flagship wine, a Rhône blend, has the unusual name of Le Cigare Volant. How did you come up with that name?

Grahm: The original working title was “Old Telegram,” which, of course, is a spoof on Vieux Télégraphe. I happened to read a chapter in Livingstone-Learmonth’s *The Wines of the Rhône* on Châteauneuf-du-Pape and came across the citation on the bizarre legislation prohibiting the landing of flying saucers and “flying cigars” in their vineyards. This seemed to me an opportunity to create an interesting label, which could be a) slightly subversive, and b) able to create a context in which the wine could be conceptualized.

When I started with Cigare Volant, the category of “Rhône Rangers” or Rhône varieties essentially did not exist. If you were going to make a premium blended red wine that was going to sell for more than \$5, you had to give people some sort of conceptual hook to understand why this was superior to just a random bunch of grapes blended together. So it was a way to set people’s expectations for style, as well as a marketing tool -- if you like Châteauneuf-du-Pape, perhaps you want to try Le Cigare Volant.

W&V: In 2007, you started using ingredient labels on your wines, detailing both the ingredients in the bottle and those used in processing. Why did you decide to do this, and what has been the reaction from consumers and colleagues?

Grahm: I did it for several reasons -- one, most selfishly, to publicly proclaim private virtue. We are really doing good work as far as minimizing additions to our wines. That’s a good thing, and we want to point that out. So, partially for Brownie points, partially as an internal discipline to make us better winemakers, thinking further ahead in the process, for example. What do we need to do to our vineyards to bring them into greater balance, thus obviating the need for nutrient/acid additions, etc.?

As far as the publicity/comments we have received, it has been mostly positive on the part of the press, largely non-existent from colleagues and consumers. I think that, again, in general, people are so overwhelmed that they are just not taking in new information. I do think that ingredient labeling is potentially very confusing to customers, but should not be eschewed for that reason. I think that it creates the beginning of an interesting dialogue.

W&V: You’ve started using some unusual labels of a different sort on your Ca’ del Solo wines. What gave you the idea for the “sensitive crystallization” labels, and what has been the reaction to them?

Grahm: The sensitive crystallization label is just one of an infinite number of potential solutions to a label. I wanted to publicly signal our interest in Biodynamics. While Biodynamics in and of itself does not necessarily equate to great or even good wine, its practice does perhaps tell the consumer something about the producer. The label is meant to convey a certain greater sobriety of purpose, and also supports the idea of transparency in our winemaking: If it is interpreted correctly, sensitive crystallization provides a unique lens to view the wine in all of its glory/limitations.

You can think of it as a fingerprint or X-ray of the wine. It will show whether the wine truly possesses life force, organization, complexity and what sort of connection the vines really have to their soil. It also will speak to how the wine has

been farmed and the overall health of the vines and the wine itself. Reaction to the label has been mixed: generally, slightly favorable, though to my great sorrow, people are still wanting the goofy labels.

W&V: Does it frustrate you that you put so much thought into serious aspects of your packaging, like your choice of closure and the ingredient labels, and your customers don’t seem to notice?

Grahm: Yes, to the extreme, though in the case of the screwcap, perhaps I have been the beneficiary rather than the victim of customers’ limited perceptual range. It does frustrate me sometimes. The current Ca’ del Solo range, featuring sensitive crystallizations, theoretically should provoke the questions, “What’s a sensitive crystallization?” “What’s Biodynamics?” “Should I be thinking about organization and life force in my wines?” Instead, I am hearing things like, “Why is there a condom (or worse) depicted on this label?”

*A resident of the Santa Cruz Mountains, **Laurie Daniel** has been a journalist for more than 25 years. Although she grew up in wine-deprived surroundings in the Midwest, she quickly developed an interest in wine after moving to California. She has been writing about wine for publications for nearly 15 years and has been a Wines & Vines contributor since 2006. To contact her or comment on this article, e-mail edit@winesandvines.com.*