

{ CELLAR NOTES }

by Marianne Frantz

Rhône Ranger

Randall Grahm's unconventional approach has the Central Coast riding high in the saddle.



California's picturesque Central Coast is home to many quality wine regions, including Monterey, Paso Robles, Santa Ynez and the Santa Maria Valley. Yet, until the movie *Sideways* made the Central Coast wildly popular, these regions were overshadowed by the reputation of Napa Valley and Sonoma.

Try telling that to Randall Grahm, one of the original, offbeat rebels who bought land in the Santa Cruz Mountains of the Central Coast in 1979 to craft top-quality Pinot Noir.

Passionate about French wines, Grahm was determined to make the next great Central Coast Pinot Noir, but quickly found that his vineyard conditions were perfect for growing Rhône Valley grape varieties.

Grahm planted his Bonny Doon Vineyard with once obscure Rhône Valley varieties such as Syrah, Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne. This move ultimately afforded him the reputation as a trailblazer and led to the formation of the Rhône Rangers, a volunteer group promoting Rhône Valley plantings in the United States.

The release of his 1984 vintage of Le Cigare Volant (The Flying Cigar) brought plenty of attention to the valley, and for good reason. The grapes in the bottle and the name on the label were, at the time, very odd.

Paying homage to the famous Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation, Le Cigare Volant was inspired by a cigar-shaped UFO spotted over the vineyards in France. Needless to say, the wine was not your average California bottling. As a result, today the region is spotted with hundreds of good producers.

By the late 1980s, Grahm expanded his reach to include plantings in Monterey County's Ca' del Solo vineyard. Instead of Rhône varieties, Grahm selected native Italian varieties such as Nebbiolo, Barbera, Muscat and Sangiovese.

A champion for the underdog varieties, Grahm has a reputation of looking for the next big thing. From screw caps to biodynamic practices to nutritional labeling (his most recent revolution), Grahm makes it a habit to be an irreverent figure at the forefront of wine innovation. Lucky for us, the juice in the bottle lives up to its maker's reputation.

Marianne Frantz, CWE and founder of the Cleveland Wine School, was joined by her tasting consultants in selecting and sampling wines for this month's Cellar Notes.



2004 Le Cigare Volant (\$30): Crafted using the Mourvèdre, Syrah, Grenache and Cinsault varieties from the southern Rhône Valley, this wine is a blend of spice cake, raspberry, pepper and cherry tobacco. Built to age, the wine will evolve for a few years in your cellar.

2006 Le Cigare Blanc (\$22): A blend of two Rhône Valley whites, Grenache Blanc and Roussanne, this medium-body wine offers herbal aromas with a hint of spice, melon and lemon zest. Try it with cheese or grilled salmon.

2005 Syrah Le Pousseur (\$18): Aromatic and perfumed with licorice, it has lots of sun-drenched spice. Violet and sandalwood aromas are supported by a good dose of acidity and silky tannins that melt in your mouth.

2007 Vin Gris de Cigare (\$15): A mélange of Rhône Valley grapes, including Cinsault, Grenache, Syrah and Roussanne, this classically styled rosé is great as an aperitif or with a simple salad or grilled sausages on the patio.



2005 Muscat Ca' del Solo, Monterey County (375 ml) (\$19): Loads of flower blossom, jasmine, melon and grapey aromas fill the glass. Crisp acidity and some slight sweetness create a balanced wine that can be paired with spicy foods.



2005 Ca' del Solo Sangiovese, San Benito County (\$18): Made from Sangiovese, Nero d'Avola, Cinsault and Colorino, this savory red is layered with cherry, tobacco, smoke and chocolate notes. Firm tannins are ripe, making it great for the table.

BETSY MOLNAR

