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LINDA MURPHY



Riesling with a sense of place: Washington

Randall Graham has been many things in his 30 years of winemaking: mad scientist, embracer of eclectic grape varieties, Francophile, Italianate, genius packager, clever linguist, the original California Rhône Ranger, screwcapiste... yet rarely a terroiriste. Not that he hasn't wanted to capture a sense of place in the bottle, it's just that he hasn't had the vineyard resources to do so.

The flagship wine from Graham – the witty eccentric behind Bonny Doon Vineyard – is a prime example. Le Cigare Volant (the French term for Flying Saucer) is an energetic Châteauneuf-style blend of Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre, Carignane and Cinsault, made from grapes grown in five different Californian counties. Hence by law, the appellation on the label must be 'California'.

For Graham's hugely popular Pacific Rim Riesling, an off-dry \$12 wine with images of sushi floating about on its clear label and bottle, provenance was even broader: 'America'. Made from grapes grown in Washington State and California, with a booster shot of German Riesling in some years, the wine made no attempt to capture a sense of place, instead favouring consistency of style, affordability and whimsical packaging.

Yet the ever-restless Graham had a mid-life crisis of sorts a few years ago, selling off his Big House and Cardinal Zin labels, and investing the proceeds in Riesling production in the Columbia Valley of eastern Washington. With the recent release of three single-vineyard Pacific Rim Rieslings, Graham and his general manager/winemaker, Nicolas

Quillé, have become terroiristes. And terribly serious ones at that.

The three Rieslings, one from the Solstice Vineyard in the Yakima Valley and two from the dramatic, biodynamically farmed Wallula Vineyard perched above the Columbia River in the Horse Heaven Hills, have traditional labels and come in brown German Hock bottles closed with screwcaps. They're drier than the original Pacific Rim Rieslings, with residual sugar levels ranging from 0.7% to 1.2%, and their price tags (\$20 to \$32) put them on the path toward fine-wine shops and restaurant lists rather than grocery-store aisle stacks.

'With the release of three single-vineyard Rieslings, Graham and Quillé have become terroiristes – and serious ones at that'

These are wines to be reckoned with: fragrant, firm, minerally and with fruit purity rarely seen in West Coast Riesling. The acidities are high, the pH levels low, and there is a Clare Valley-like, racy lime character to all three. For a first-time effort, the results are spectacular, hinting at Washington's future as not only the prodigious producer of off-dry Riesling (as it is now), but also as a maker of drier, more serious wines that, through vineyard

designation, reflect the personality of the place in which the grapes are grown.

Graham leaves the winemaking to Quillé, the former winemaker for Washington's Hogue Cellars who holds a master's degree in business administration from the University of Washington. The Frenchman oversees the new Pacific Rim winery in West Richland, Washington, which is 90% devoted to Riesling, with smaller amounts of Chenin Blanc, Gewurztraminer and Muscat. Expect he and Graham to expand their single-vineyard scheme in Washington to include Chenin Blanc, Gruner Veltliner and Albarino.

While Graham and Quillé don't own Washington vineyards, they have a long-term contract to purchase 60ha (hectares) of biodynamic grapes from Wallula Vineyard's 260ha site. The Den Hoed family planted the vines to Pacific Rim's specifications, then sold the winery in March 2008 to a partnership headed by Allen Shoup, former president and CEO of Chateau Ste-Michelle/Stimson Lane and now head of Long Shadows Vintners, a consortium of brands from winemakers including Michel Rolland, Randy Dunn, Agustin Huneeus and John Duval.

Pacific Rim will continue to buy Riesling grapes from Wallula, but expect Shoup – who, with German winemaker Armin Diel, makes Poet's Leap Riesling – to tap deeper into the vineyards for this varietal, now that he owns the place. 'I've said for years that, as good as the Columbia Valley vineyards are, we've yet to discover Washington's best site,' Shoup says. 'But with Wallula we may have arrived.'

Ste-Michelle Wine Estates may produce 1 million cases of Washington Riesling a year to slake the American consumer's ever-increasing thirst for the variety, yet Graham and Quillé have thrown down a quality and stylistic gauntlet, daring all of Washington's Riesling producers to improve. It's a competition whose time has come. **D**

Linda Murphy is our West Coast correspondent. For more on Californian wines, see the special supplement accompanying this issue

WHAT LINDA'S BEEN DRINKING THIS MONTH...

PASO ROBLES REDS

Known for its Cabernet Sauvignons and Rhône-style wines, Paso Robles also turns out impressive red blends that aren't dominated by Cabernet or Syrah.

Robert Hall Winery's Meritage, with equal amounts of Cabernets Franc and Sauvignon and splashes of Merlot and

Malbec, is firm and refined, with herbal complexity – great with steak. The riper though refined **Calcareous Vineyard's Twisted Sisters** – one-third each of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, plus Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon – is a fine choice for summer barbecued ribs.