

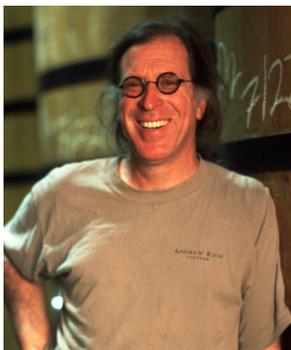
The Wines of Bonny Doon

by Tom Cannavan

There can be few more idiosyncratic wine labels than Bonny Doon of California. Under the direction of its winemaker, founder, guru and all-round beat-poet and philosopher, Randall Grahm, the Bonny Doon output is obsessively focused on Rhône and Italian varietals, though as you will see here, sometimes follows interesting side roads too.

Grahm's first love was Pinot Noir. In 1981 he planted the Bonny Doon Estate vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains, intent on producing the Great American Pinot. Success with the variety proved elusive however, whilst experimental batches of Rhône varieties - Syrah, Roussanne, Marsanne and Viognier - showed significantly more promise in this terroir. In 1986 the first vintage of Le Cigare Volant appeared, an homage to Châteauneuf-du-Pape, that quickly developed a cult following.

A few years later, the ever-inquisitive Grahm's newest obsession took hold, in the shape of the great Italian varieties. Soon, a second estate vineyard called Ca' del Solo in Monterey County was being planted with Italianate varieties including Nebbiolo, Barbera, Pinot Grigio and Dolcetto. More recently, everything from Spain's Albariño to Portugal's Loureiro have come to Grahm's attention and subsequently joined the happy throng.



Grahm's quirky and playful nature imbues every aspect of the Bonny Doon operation, from its information-packed and often amusing back labels and funky website, to the wines themselves. A passionate advocate and early adopter of screwcaps, in 2004 Grahm staged the Great American Corkscrew Recall, an initiative whereby consumers could exchange their corkscrews for a T-shirt, rather like feminists symbolically burning their bras in the '60s. But his actions are not always so frivolous. In 2004 all of Bonny Doon's vineyards switched to biodynamic farming practices, in both estate vineyards and those of Bonny Doon's contract growers, and his back labels carry a full list not only of ingredients, but of each processes and substance used in the winemaking.

the wines

I recently received a package of Bonny Doon's wines from California to try for myself.

white wines

Ca' del Solo Muscat 2008

How wonderful to find a Muscat that delivers emphatically on both nose and palate. Too often the exotic aromatic promise of Muscat wines peters out in a lemony, often watery blandness on the tongue, but not here: the powerful, musky aromatics perfumed with jasmine and Turkish delight lead onto to a decisive, fairly rich-textured palate where a concentrated minerality is just lightened and softened by a hint of peach fruit sweetness. Layers of citrus unfold too, keeping this wine intriguing through to the long, shimmering finish. A real tour de force Muscat this that answers my initial questions about its relatively high price. 91/100. Around £16.00, Wined up Here, Noel Young. See also all stockists on wine-searcher



Ca' del Solo Albariño 2008

So what how does a northern Californian, Biodynamic rendition of Galicia's Albariño fare? Surprisingly well is the answer. The nose has a hit of lemon rind and a touch of wildflower fragrance, with a cool, stony minerality too. On the palate this is all about fantastically bracing citrus fruit, with lemon and lime, a hint of orange, and perhaps a slightly fuller mid-palate weight that many Spanish examples. It is terrifically juicy and pure, pushing through in a steady, if uncomplicated, stream into a lip-smacking finish. Delightful stuff again. 90/100. Around £17.50, The good wine shop, Luvians, Wined up Here. See also all stockists on wine-searcher

Bonny Doon, Le Cigare Blanc 2007

Grahm's take on a white Châteauneuf is a blend of 65% Roussanne and Grenache Blanc. The nose is immediately rich and savoury, with a little waxy note, a touch of pear skin and quite fleshy melon fruit. In the mouth this is undeniably a big, powerhouse wine. 14.6% alcohol testifies to that, but so does a broad, mouth-filling raft of dry, white fruit flavours with real concentration and density. Undeniably reminiscent of more serious white CndP like the Beaucastel Blanc, and best with hearty pastas or risottos, or some veal or chicken Milanese. 91/100. Around £18.00, see all stockists on wine-searcher.com



rosé wines

Bonny Doon, Vin Gris de Cigare Rosé 2008

This is a typical southern Rhône blend of red wine grapes Grenache (58%), Cinsault, Mourvèdre and Syrah, but with 10% of white grapes, namely Roussanne and Grenache Blanc, too. It's a serious style of oak-aged rosé (as befits its lofty price) with a pomegranate colour and mineral-infused nose over some softer strawberry and raspberry fruit and just a touch of apricot. On the palate quite striking and powerful (13.6% ABV) with lots of spice and smoky savour, and dry redcurrant fruit. There is a crispness about the lemon and mineral finish, but this stays a pretty chewy, savoury style with some tannin at its core. 89/100. Around £14.00, see all stockists on wine-searcher.com

red wines

Ca' del Solo, Sangiovese 2006

California does Chianti with this blend of Sangiovese, 16% Freisa, 6% Syrah and 1% Grenache. The nose is bold and spicy, with schisty, earth and herb notes giving a smoky edge to dark cherry fruit. Big and sweet on the palate, there's a real chunkiness to this wine: it's a non-nonsense, bramble and cherry-packed red with chewy tannins and a warming core of spice and charry toast. A lovely wine this, as honest as the day is long, and finishing with uncomplicated but delightful presence. 91/100. Around £15.00, see all stockists on wine-searcher

Bonny Doon, Le Cigare Volant 2005

The latest incarnation of the wine that cemented Bonny Doon's reputation, the 2005 Cigare Volant, is the smallest production in twenty years and is a blend of 50% Grenache with 24% Mourvèdre, 22% Syrah, 3% Carignan and 1% Cinsault. It has a sensuously deep nose, with lots of classy, cedary French oak and a ruffled velvet fruit. On the palate that bittersweet black fruit floods the mouth, with a chocolaty richness and lots of spice and pepper adding warmth and chewy depth. The tannins are rugged but chocolaty and svelte, and this has a fine, cherry edge of acidity that adds some tension. A long and seriously delicious wine this, with ageing potential. 93/100. Around £19.00, see all stockists on wine-searcher.com



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