

FOOD & WINE

'Popelouchum' the domain of the 'Rhone Ranger'

By Tony Correia

Sitting and sipping one of my most favorite Grenache wines, the fabled Clos de Gilroy, from Bonny Doon, my mind is wont to wander chasing superfluous quandaries. How many winemakers have asteroids named after them, you might ask? Perhaps there may be more, but I know of only one. The Rhoneranger is a main belt asteroid on an orbit of 5+ years, and was named after the California wine industry's Don Quixote, Randall Graham, the Rhone Ranger of Bonny Doon Winery. Long recognized as the gadfly of the California wine game, the "Willy Wonka" of the wine world, court jester, provocateur, prodigious punster, prince of poetic parody, philosopher, and frantic footnoter, Randall has long challenged the status quo with innovative winemaking, carrying the flag of lesser known Rhone varieties, such as my favored Grenache, amidst the bastions of conventional wisdom of Chardonnay, Cabernet, and more Chardonnay and Cabernet. Of course, he joins



the legendary Josh Jensen and his Calera winery, in this area. In fact, Randall notes he began making wine through the generosity of Josh, who allowed him some space to crush and ferment grapes as he began his journey down the wine roads.

The Man, the Myth, the Legend

Stories of Randall Graham, his long history of winemaking, and his antics in the industry, abound. The internet has many images of Randall in various configurations, from court jester to Rhone Ranger. One of the more lasting images is of Randall walking the aisles of Vinexpo in Bordeaux, in 1999, wrapped in a (real) straight jacket with his arms tied, and with "Help Me" painted across his back in red paint... Sometimes known as a "holy terroir" at UC Davis, rumor had it that professors would duck into janitorial closets when they saw him coming, but, as Randall is wont to confess; "It's Rhonely at the top."

Randall is also greatly recognized, and famed, for his prodigious mastery of the English language, a vocabulary second to no-one outside the halls of Academia, and mastery of the pun and poetic parody. Some have suggested he sleeps with a thesaurus under his pillow, absorbing the words nocturnally. But I suspect it is more an ingestion thing, with him consuming pages of various thesauri with some fava beans and a good Grenache. "Been Doon So Long", his book on all things vinous, was published in 2009, and is readily available for fans of wine and humor. With only a quick glance at this book, the reader will note Graham's penchant for footnotes, which will often run on for pages. But the book is most often noted for the section "Poesy" where he launches parodies of many great poetic mas-



Randall Graham challenges the status quo with innovative wine making.

terpieces, including:

- The Love Song of J. Alfred Rootstock
- Howlbariño
- The Rimeshot of the Ancient Marsanner
- Da Vino Commedia: The Vinferno
- And even an opera, or two, including

"Don Giovese in Bakersfield: An Opera Giacosa."

Popelouchum

After extraordinary successes in building and then selling two large wine brands, Randall's vision eventually led him on the quest of the great American "vin de terroir", a wine that speaks of its "terroir", its birthplace deep in the soil, rather than a "vin d'effort", the machinations of the grower and winemaker. Years spent in search of just the right site, with just the right combination of climate, slope, aspect, limestone, precipitation, elevation, and virgin soils gradually led this "terroirist" to Popelouchum, a 280 acre farm out on Mission Vineyard Road, just below the St. Francis retreat, which is home to his new es-

tate vineyard and farm. The name "Popelouchum," pronounced "pope-loh-SHOOM," is the Mutsun language word the Ohlone natives historically used for the site. Its primary meaning is "the village" and secondary meaning is "paradise."

Fanatically devoted to the principles of organic farming and biodynamics, Randall is pursuing several unique and fascinating projects at Popelouchum on his way to the great American vin d terroir. Amidst an abundance of biodynamically grown vegetables and fruits, the future vineyards are just beginning to take shape. A small Pinot Noir vineyard is an intriguing venture, planted on extraordinarily tight vine spacings, with vine rows only one meter (39"+) apart, and the vines only one-half meter apart within the rows, for a plant population of over 8,000 vines per acre. Compare that with the conventional commercial vineyard plantings which tend to run about 1,000 vines per acre, and you can begin to grasp the intensity of Randall's venture.

Randall is also propagating a little-known grape rootstock, vitis berlandieri, which had adapted to the limestone hills of its native Texas and was highly tolerant of soils high in lime content and is known for its significant drought tolerance, exceptionally important to Randall's aim of dry-farming his vineyard. A drive up to Fremont's Peak allows rather dramatic views over the San Juan Valley, Monterey Bay, and the Hollister Hills, but also reveals the old limestone quarry where the Ideal Cement Plant harvested limestone for so many years. The soils of the canyon are quite high in limestone, echoing the natural terroir of many of the famed Old World vineyard

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sites, and this vine may thus be ideally suited to Popelouchum.

But perhaps the most intriguing project at Popelouchum is a large plot of Grenache vines, planted from seed, ensuring each vine will be unique unto itself. Vines planted from seed also tend to be geotropic, sending their roots towards the center of the earth (geotropic), penetrating deep into the soil, tapping ancient moisture and multiple minerals amidst the dark rocky depths.

Randall's next effort in search of the true vin de terroir may prove to dwarf this Grenache-from-seed planting. This is his 10,000 grape vine varieties project, where he will deliberately develop 10,000 unique vines. Each will be a separate, distinct variety, from parents yet to be chosen. No single vine may prove to be the source of the next most favored grape, but the amalgamation of this



broad collection of distinct grapes could prove to produce a wholly unique wine, a true expression of terroir. This follows on the path of the old "field blend" wines, made from fields planted to many distinct varieties but harvested, crushed, and fermented all together. While this may seem to many to be just wholly unfettered chaos, it is in fact carefully choreographed chaos.

Or, as Randall describes this process:

"Myself, I am particularly keen on the idea of growing grapes from seed (phylloxera-risk permitting) and thus creating a tremendous range of new and unique germplasm; this could provide the complexity of a gamut of

unique genotypes in a given vineyard. This project will last longer than a single life-time, but ultimately could generate absolute individuality and uniqueness to a wine, as well as enormously accelerate the process of selection *massale*,

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undoubtedly the key to enhanced congruity of variety, clone and perhaps sub-clone to a given site. In other words, how cool would it be to have uniquely bespoke varieties for your vineyard? In the end, the greatest advantage we have in the New World is our relative youth and the ability to see the wine world with fresh eyes."

I borrowed the preceding quote from Randall's blog, www.beendoonsolong.com which is an endless source of oenological whimsy and "incendiary literary devices" from the Pinot punster.

Homage to Chateauneuf

One of Randall's most popular wines, Le Cigare Volante, is a blend of the traditional varieties of the Rhone Valley; Syrah, Grenache, Cinsault, Mourvedre and Carignane. The name, of course, evolves from Chateauneuf-du-Papes' 1954 municipal decree banning the overhead flying, landing or taking off of flying saucers (or flying "cigars", thus = le Cigar Volante) in the commune. The

decree appears to be effective, as there have been no reports of any UFOs in the village, and we can only hope this folds over onto San Juan, keeping us safe from those pesky flying cigars and all other alien invaders.

What's next for the intrepid Rhone Ranger? As Popelouchum grows, and matures, will the logical next step be a tasting room in San Juan, sharing the fruits of his labor of love with his adopted mission village? Whatever the next act unveils, San Juan Bautista can be justfully proud to have this legend of the California wine world, the wine industry's Don Quixote, Rhone Ranger, gadfly of the California wine game, "Willy Wonka" of the wine world, court jester, prodigious punster, prince of poetic parody, frantic footnoter, provocateur, and philosopher, amidst us in our enduring mission village.

Stay dooned... ■

Tony Correia is a prominent consultant to the wine industry, a frequent speaker at industry conferences and symposiums, and a Contributing Editor to Wine Business Monthly magazine.
