

BY LAURA NESS

# THE NEXT LEVEL OF DOON

Randall Grahm's  
Popelouchum experiment  
takes winegrowing to extremes



Nothing Randall Grahm does comes as a surprise to his colleagues. The California winemaker has a reputation for turning the most fanciful concepts into reality, and for zigging when everyone else zags.

Beginning in 1983 with his attempt to recreate Burgundy at the site of the first Bonny Doon Vineyard in California's Santa Cruz Mountains, to his reinvention as the original Rhone Ranger, to his dives-

ture of some of the brands that made him an icon, Grahm seems poised to rise again.

In 2011, Grahm purchased Popelouchum, a 280-acre property outside the mission town of San Juan Bautista, in San Benito County. Pronounced "pop-loh-SHOOM," the name of Bonny Doon's new property is the Mutsun word the Ohlone natives gave the site. Its secondary meaning is "paradise."

It's a forlorn, ruggedly beautiful piece of parched earth that looks the way the Central Coast must

have looked to the early Franciscan missionaries: bleached blonde, oak-studded hills beneath a relentlessly cloudless sky. A bone-dry savannah just a few animals shy of a safari, with warm-to-hot temperatures and an ever-present wind, it seemed to Grahm ideal for growing grapes from seed – even though the site gets less than 13 inches of rain per year.

## WINES OF PLACE

Having had frequent nightmares about the ravages of climate change and the inevitable cata-

Randall Grahm's Popelouchum estate in San Juan Bautista is remote, parched and underfunded. Even so, he is optimistic that it will create true "wines of place."



clysm, Grahm had long been thinking about the effects on viticulture. Wanting to do something about it, he fastened onto the idea of creating drought-resistant grape varieties by letting Darwinism loose. He thought, "Let's let the uniqueness of the place self-select the varieties and clones most suitable to this particular climate and limestone rich soils."

Grahm also suspected that Popelouchum might be a place to create true "wines of terroir," like those of Burgundy.

"When I worked at the Wine Merchant (in Los Angeles) in 1975, I was fortunate enough to taste the great wines of Comte de Vogüé, the '71 Musigny and Bonnes Mares," he said. "These wines were just life-changing. How could Chateau Palmer and Chateau La Mission Haut-Brion (from Bordeaux) have such an incredibly distinctive character? This is that mysterious 'otherness' that wines of place possess."

Wines of place are the only wines that really matter, Grahm said, and he wants to be making them. "Ninety-nine percent of the wines in the market today are not wines of place. Wines of place connect you to the earth, they provide a deep, more emotional connection. I think they are more nourishing, whether richer in minerals or antioxidants. I can't prove this, but my sense is they have more life. They seem to resist oxidation."

## THE EXPERIMENT BEGINS

To propagate new varieties, Grahm knew he had to invest in lots of different plant material; he figured 30 varieties was a good number.



Grahm is using *Vitis berlandieri* rootstock, grown from seed.

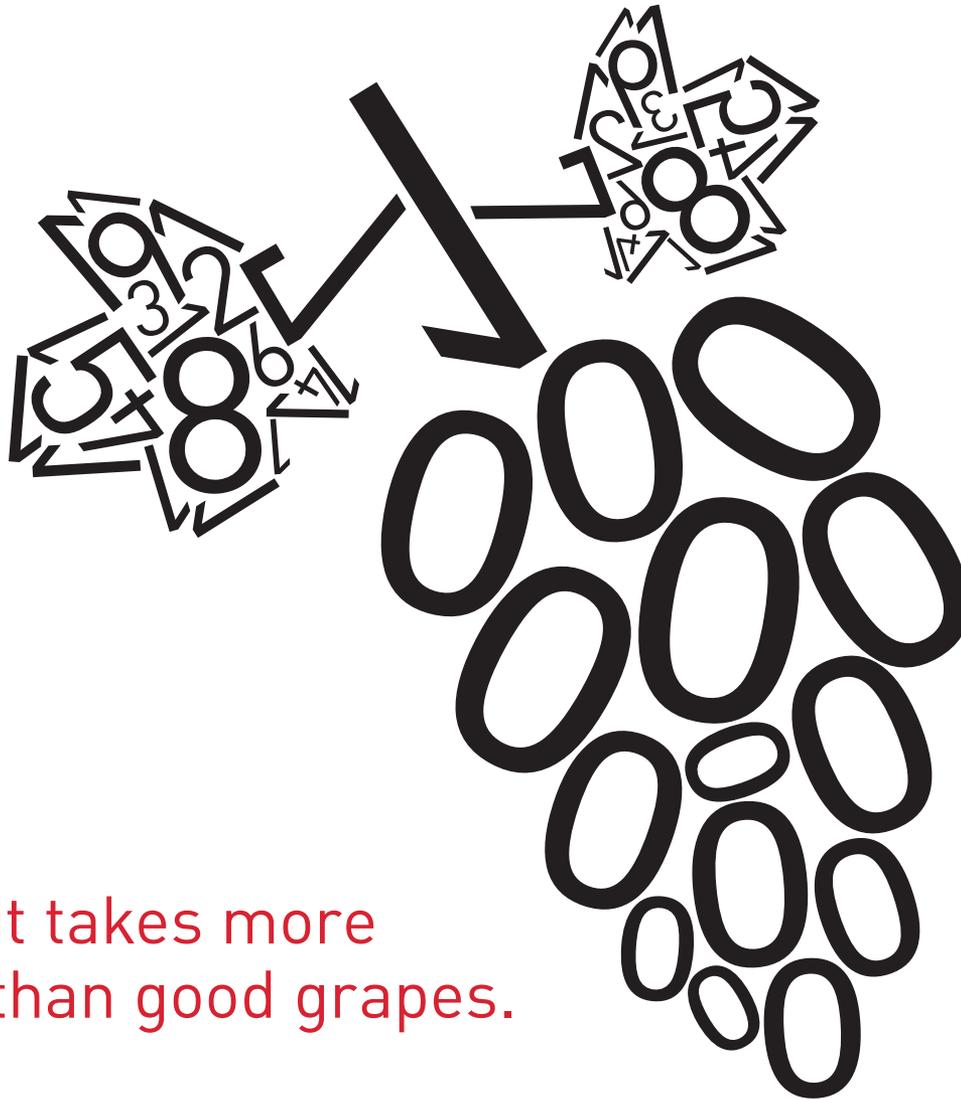
He looked primarily at super drought-resistant rootstocks, as dry-farming was a necessity. "We looked at 110R and 1103P most closely, and 1103P is the one we will be primarily using," Grahm said. "We are also establishing a plantation of pure *Vitis berlandieri* (grown from seed) and we will bud on top of that. What could possibly go wrong?" he said, chuckling.

*Vitis berlandieri* is a native grape common to Texas and the Southwest that does well in limestone-dominant soils, like those of Popelouchum.

It was Dr. Andrew Walker of the Plant Breeding Center at UC Davis who suggested the use of *Vitis berlandieri* to Grahm, and helped him to source it from Texas. Walker says he feels that this drought-resistant rootstock will be a good basis for grafting and that the project will be beneficial, as it's something he's always wanted to do.

## AT A GLANCE

- + Popelouchum, Bonny Doon's 280-acre property in San Juan Bautista, is intended as a breeding ground for new drought-resistant grape varieties.
- + Drought-resistant rootstock and biochar are part of a larger quest to augment global agriculture in the face of climate change.
- + Using Pinot Noir as a starter, Grahm hopes to create wines that truly reflect a sense of place.
- + Bonny Doon intends to finance the experiment via crowdsourcing.



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"I am highly confident this experiment will produce results almost immediately," he said. "The biggest challenge for Randall will be selecting the varieties he wants to propagate, based on color, productivity and wine quality."

Oddly, Grahm chose to plant Pinot Noir, which is the only variety currently planted outside the estate's onsite vine nursery. Inside the nursery are varieties such as Sagrantino, Fer Servadou, Grenache Gris, Furmint and Ruché, all of which Grahm is hoping to field-bud to rootstock in the next few years.

"The decision to plant Pinot utterly flies in the face of everything I believe and stand for," he admitted, "i.e., you don't plant something just because you love it to pieces; you plant it because you love it and you feel it is also an appropriate place to grow it. But we only did about two-thirds of an acre, and for that reason I have been

able to rationalize this very irrational decision. We used maybe six or seven clones, including Swan, Mount Eden and some of the putative DRC clones."

Ruché is another variety of great interest to Grahm. From the Piedmont region of Italy, it has aromas of rose petals and is often made in a frizzante style.

### BIOCHAR: THE NEXT BIG THING?

Then came the quest for a way to give the vines a leg up in their lunar landing mission. Grahm was excited about the use of biochar, essentially a porous mineral-rich charcoal produced from trees or plant material using minimal oxygen. There is great hope among scientists for its ability to increase soil fertility while sequestering carbon.

Grahm first learned about biochar from Greg Steltenpohl, former CEO of the Odwalla juice company.

He further educated himself with visits to Hans-Peter Schmidt, who runs research projects on the use of biochar in vineyards and farms in Switzerland and southern France.

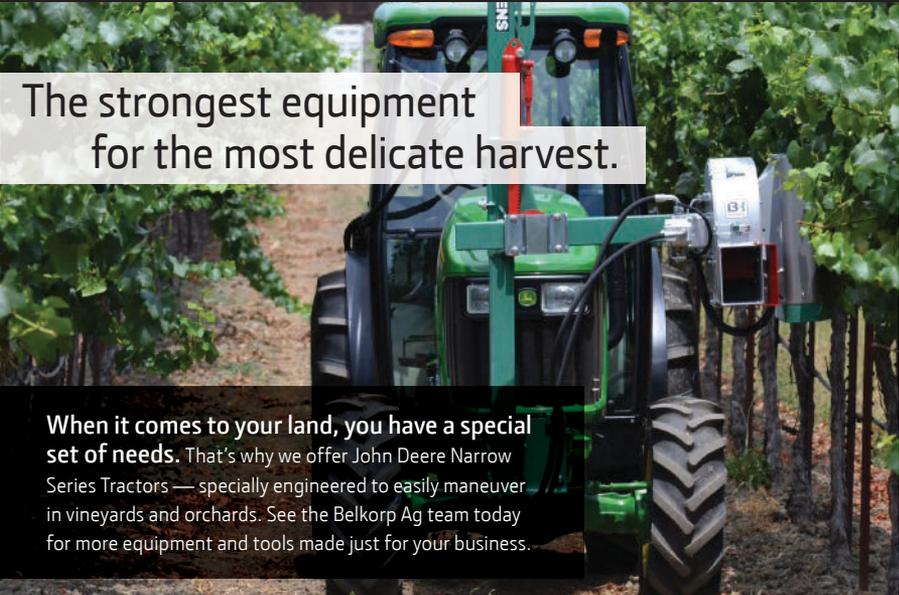
"Schmidt tells me that there is not enough supply to meet demand," Grahm said. "Europe is far ahead of the New World on this. Biochar's benefits are likely useful in nutrient-deficient soils and/or very dry climates that need to conserve moisture." Schmidt said he expects that at high rates of application (8 tons per acre of biochar plus 8 tons per acre of compost), there could be an improvement of 30%-35% water-holding capacity.

Grahm is importing biochar from Romania, where the net cost comes out to around \$550 per ton, compared to domestic biochar, which at the time of purchase, ran \$800-\$900 per ton.

In addition to planting rootstock in biochar, Grahm planted olive




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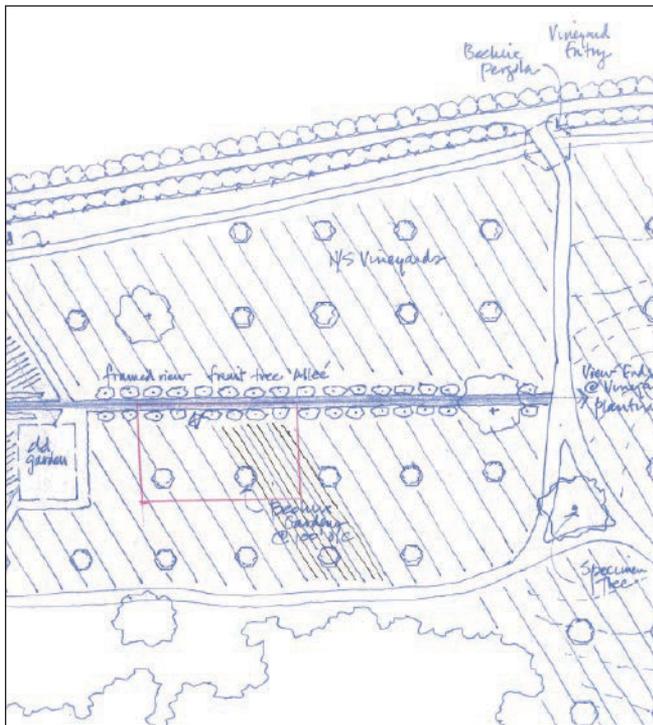


Bob, Paul, Jerry and Jerry.

trees and an organic garden that produced some of the most intensely flavored tomatoes, strawberries and basil he'd ever tasted, he said.

## WATER: THE BAZILLION DOLLAR QUESTION

Grahm wants to plant another 90 acres or so of vines, but cannot do so without water, the lifeblood of the universe. "Building a pond here is ground zero," Grahm said. "Basically, our water table is so low it's in China," he joked.



This drawing shows Grahm's vision for the future of the Popelouchum property. In addition to vineyards, it includes peach and olive trees, and a vegetable garden.

The Bonny Doon team plans to avoid regular drip irrigation, preferring to defer the heavy lifting to nature. "We want to encourage nature's intelligence, like letting kids learn on their own without protecting them from everything," Grahm said.

Once he has water from the pond he hopes to build, not only can vine planting begin in earnest, but he'll also be able to grow specialty crops such as *peche de vigne* (also known as blood peach), a delicacy of Alsace and Burgundy planted to provide snacks for vineyard workers. The fruit also makes jam and eau de vie, additional products Grahm envisions as part of the larger output of the ranch.

## STATE OF THE DOONIVERSE

After one real harvest from the tiny Pinot Noir vineyard in 2014, plus some grapes from the nursery – mostly Grenache and Ruché – Grahm is optimistic. The first crop of Pinot yielded less than half a barrel of wine, he said, most of the grapes having gone to raccoons and birds – but still, it showed promise. Similarly, he made about a barrel of Grenache, which, he said, exhibited the kind of wild minerality that excites him and keeps him focused.

"Something far more interesting may develop beyond a proven variety," Grahm said. "It may seem counterintuitive, but when varietal characteristics are submerged, does this allow other characters to come to the fore? Until we do it, we don't know what will emerge. Magic is happening with the creation of small variations/variegations on the path to complexity and nuance in the resulting wine."

**Laura Ness**, aka "Her VineNess," is a wine journalist and critic who judges a variety of wine competitions and writes regularly for consumer and trade publications, including the websites [WineOhTV.com](http://WineOhTV.com) and [WineFoodExplorer.com](http://WineFoodExplorer.com).

Comments? Please e-mail us at [feedback@vwmmmedia.com](mailto:feedback@vwmmmedia.com).

## FUNDING THE EXPERIMENT

Most people think of Bonny Doon as a large winery, but these days it produces only about 50,000 cases per year. Money is in short supply, so Grahm invites all interested parties to help the experiment come to fruition. He dreams of 5,000 supporters, and believes the property can produce about 6,000 cases of wine a year. An initial infusion of

\$50,000-\$100,000 would be sufficient to develop the pond and infrastructure for the experimental plantings.

Grahm plans to create an advisory board of viticulturists from around the world and wants to focus on how biochar can support global agriculture.

While the marketing and business development team at

Bonny Doon is still working with Kickstarter and other platforms to formalize the details of the crowdsourcing campaign, it plans to offer a number of rewards for investors, such as the opportunity to name new grape varieties developed at the site.

For information, visit [bonnydoonvineyard.com](http://bonnydoonvineyard.com) – L.N.