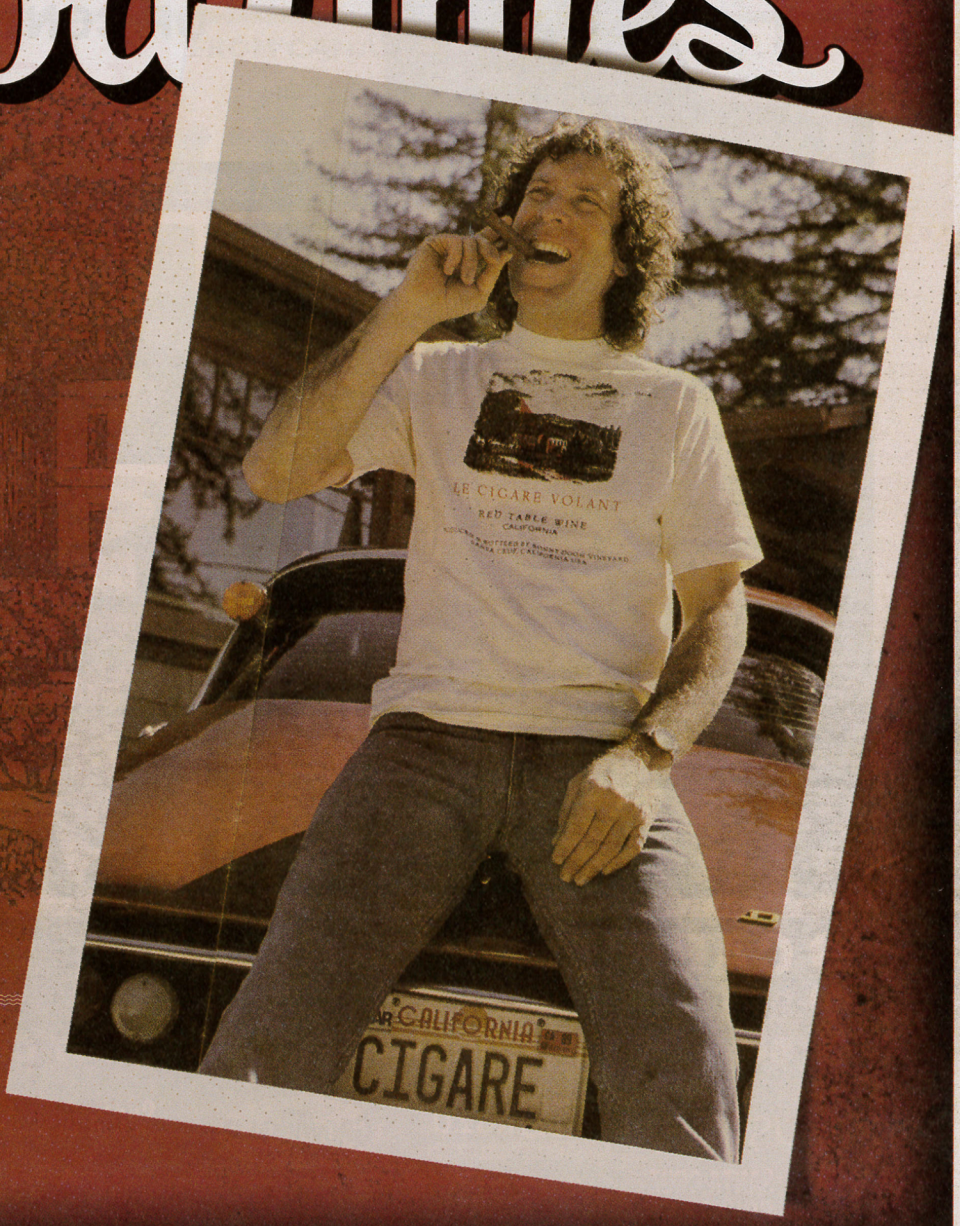
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08.05.15

Good Times

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO RANDALL GRAHM?



WINE ICONOCLAST REINVENTS BONNY DOON VINEYARD

BY **CHRISTINA WATERS**

RANDALL GRAHM RELOADED

The Bonny Doon Vineyard iconoclast dives into uncharted waters again, fueled by an epic new vision of American soil and a search for the grape less planted

BY **CHRISTINA WATERS**

When a tall young Beverly Hills oenophile transplanted himself to Bonny Doon in the early 1980s, he wanted to produce nothing less than the great American Pinot Noir. A vineyard was planted, but, alas, the realities of soil, climate and pestilence took their toll, and the enterprising winemaker turned his attention to the more responsive grapes of the Rhône—Grenache and Syrah.

Awash in wines with names involving cigars and telegrams and adorned with original art by counterculture icons, the silver-tongued Randall Grahm quickly made a name for himself as the "Rhône Ranger."

Soon came eclectic varietals made from grapes rarely planted in California. Crafting Rieslings, Nebbiolos and Sangioveses like mad, Grahm traveled the world marketing his wines. With his Pacific Rim Rieslings and Big House Reds—large, lucrative lines—Grahm literally became a household name. He was on the cover of *Wine Spectator*, the industry bible, looking cocky and smoking a big cigar. You couldn't pick up a wine list on either coast without spotting one of his wines, and his reach grew across four continents. By 2004, his brand had expanded into the 28th largest winery in the U.S.

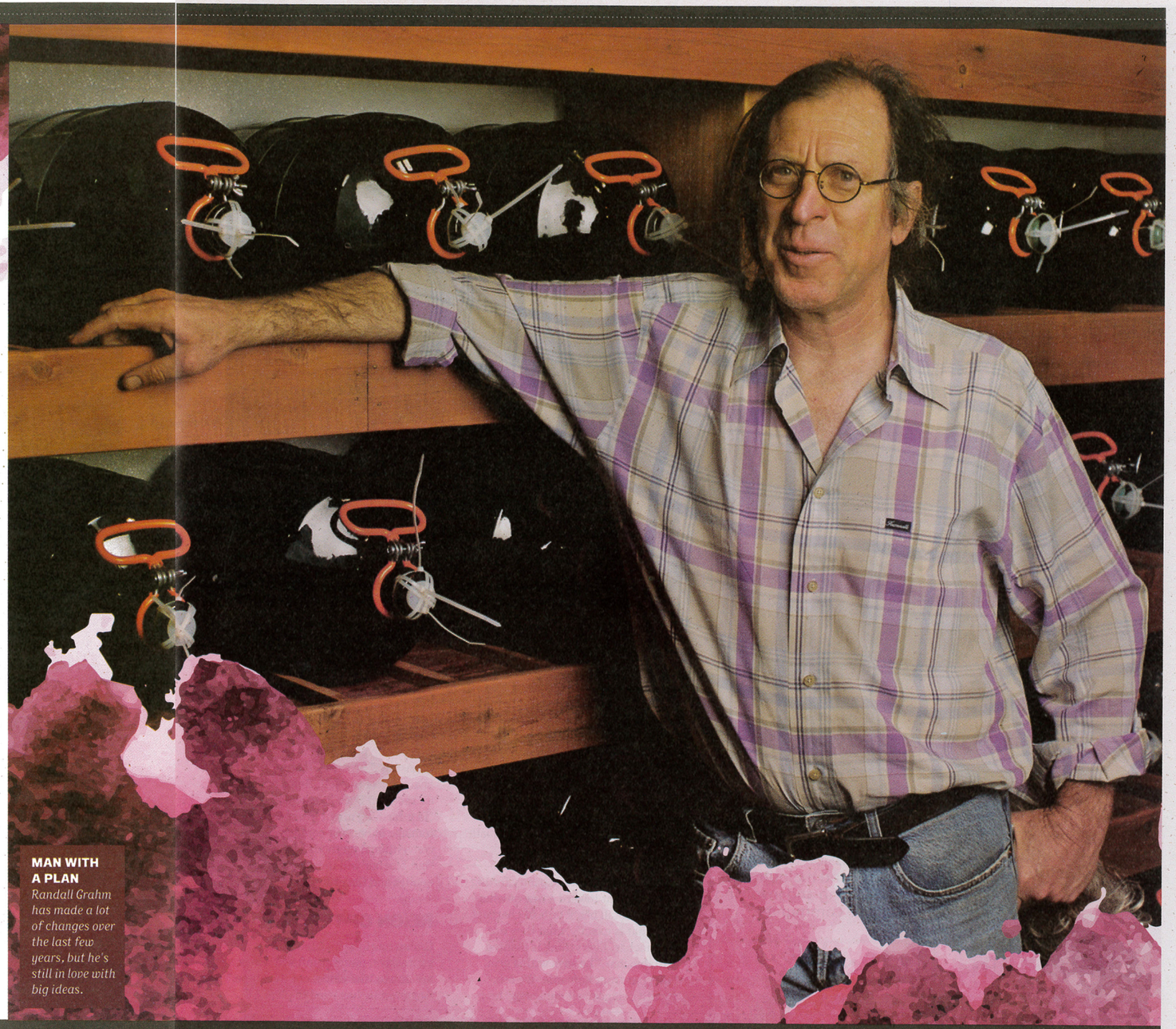
And then, *poof*, he and his wine empire dropped off the radar. Suddenly the Big House brand belonged to some large, faceless corporate structure. His crown-jewel Santa Cruz restaurant Le Cigare Volant closed. The once-familiar labels grew esoteric and promiscuous in design and varietal. Over the last few years, many longtime fans both locally and elsewhere began to wonder: what happened to Randall Grahm?

Now, however, he seems poised for a second act. He's uprooted his Bonny Doon Vineyard tasting room from the Ingalls Street complex on the Westside of Santa Cruz and transplanted it to a former art gallery in Davenport. Despite taking more and more time to be a highly involved father of an almost-teenage daughter, he finds time to be around the country selling wines like it was 1990. And he's getting his hands dirty the old-fashioned way—as a born-again viticulturist with a daring dream for his 400-acre estate in San Juan Bautista.

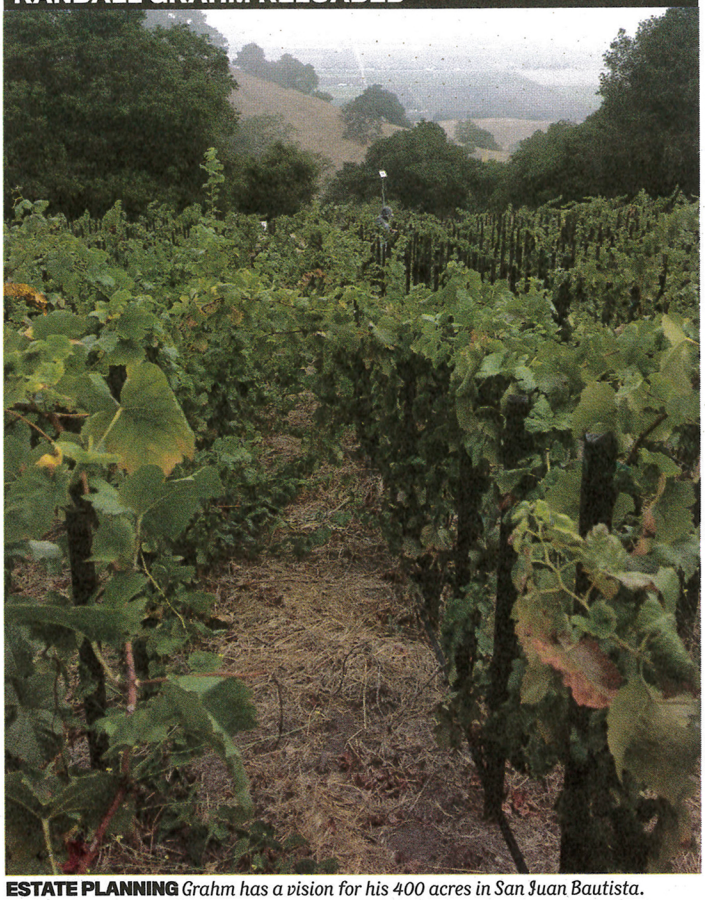
THE ESTATE

I am picking raspberries with Randall Grahm on that estate, acres purchased with proceeds from the sell-off of his high profile brands. It is as pure a slice of old California landscape as one can imagine. The raspberries, warm from the afternoon sun, are the best I've tasted since I was a kid. They occupy a swath of organic orchards and olive groves planted along Grahm's new estate vineyard, already vigorous with waist-high Syrah, Grenache and assorted exotic, esoteric and experimental grape varietals.

For the iconoclastic wine whisperer, the path to whatever comes next invariably requires a walk on the wild side. And right now—and from the looks of things, for a long long time to come—that means a significant amount of attention, fine-tuning and labor will go into the acres he intends to fill with vineyards.



MAN WITH A PLAN
Randall Grahm has made a lot of changes over the last few years, but he's still in love with big ideas.



ESTATE PLANNING *Grahm has a vision for his 400 acres in San Juan Bautista.*

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Having once graduated with a degree in plant sciences from UC Davis, Grahm has gone back to roots.

"We're putting in a pond," he says, pointing toward workers and a few backhoes rumbling around in the 95-degree heat. "That's to capture rainwater—should such occur—and raise the humidity to help with growing all sorts of vegetables."

Vegetables, orchards, and oddball grape varietals such as Furmint and Rossese—the years have not diminished Grahm's capacity for Big Ideas. I point toward a row of what looks like tall black hills of charcoal. And that is exactly what they are.

"Biochar. Everything is planted with biochar," he says with a grin. "Biochar from Romania. We mix it with compost—it enhances the water-holding capacity of the soil." But it does much more than that, Grahm believes. "It turns smart soil into brilliant soil. The microrhizome population increases. Everything grows like Jack and the Beanstalk," he says. "It amplifies the character of the soil. Helps mineral extraction." Does it do windows? "Dry-farming might lower the tonnage of harvest compared with conventional methods," he admits, "but biochar will increase grape quality and flavor intensity."

REIGN OF TERROIR

Grahm has long insisted that expressive, mineral-infused wines are due to "the place, not the grape." Anyone who has tried to plant

"I was obsessed with Pinot Noir for 30 years. I wanted to make the great Pinot Noir. It was so stupid. To make a great Pinot Noir, I would have had to go to Burgundy." **– Randall Grahm**

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Riesling in the tropics can testify. So he's essentially asking "what can we do in North America that Europe can't do?"

The revolutionary part of Grahm's New World dream is to plant grapes from seed. They can't do *that* in Europe, due to the presence of phylloxera.

Grahm's hyper-terrestrial plan calls for creating, with the help of resistant rootstocks, no less than 10,000 brand-new, never-before-been-seen grape varieties. The official statement runs like this: Grahm wants to create 10,000 new grape varieties over the next 10 years, and to plant a uniquely heterodox vineyard—each vine genetically distinctive from the other—in the hopes of revealing a new Grand Cru in the New World.

"There are two bets here," he carefully explains to me. "One bet is that by creating so much variety in the vineyard, you can eventually identify gifted individuals totally congruent with the site. And the second bet is that by blending those gifted individuals, you'll create something enjoyable and unique."

The result, he believes, will truly be a New World wine that expresses this—and no other—spot on the planet.

VINTAGE FRONTIER

We pass rows of melons, some asparagus, and the incredible raspberries next to a block of Grenache planted onto Texas rootstock. "Very drought resistant," he explains of the rootstock he personally "imported" from Texas. The Grenache was grown from seed.

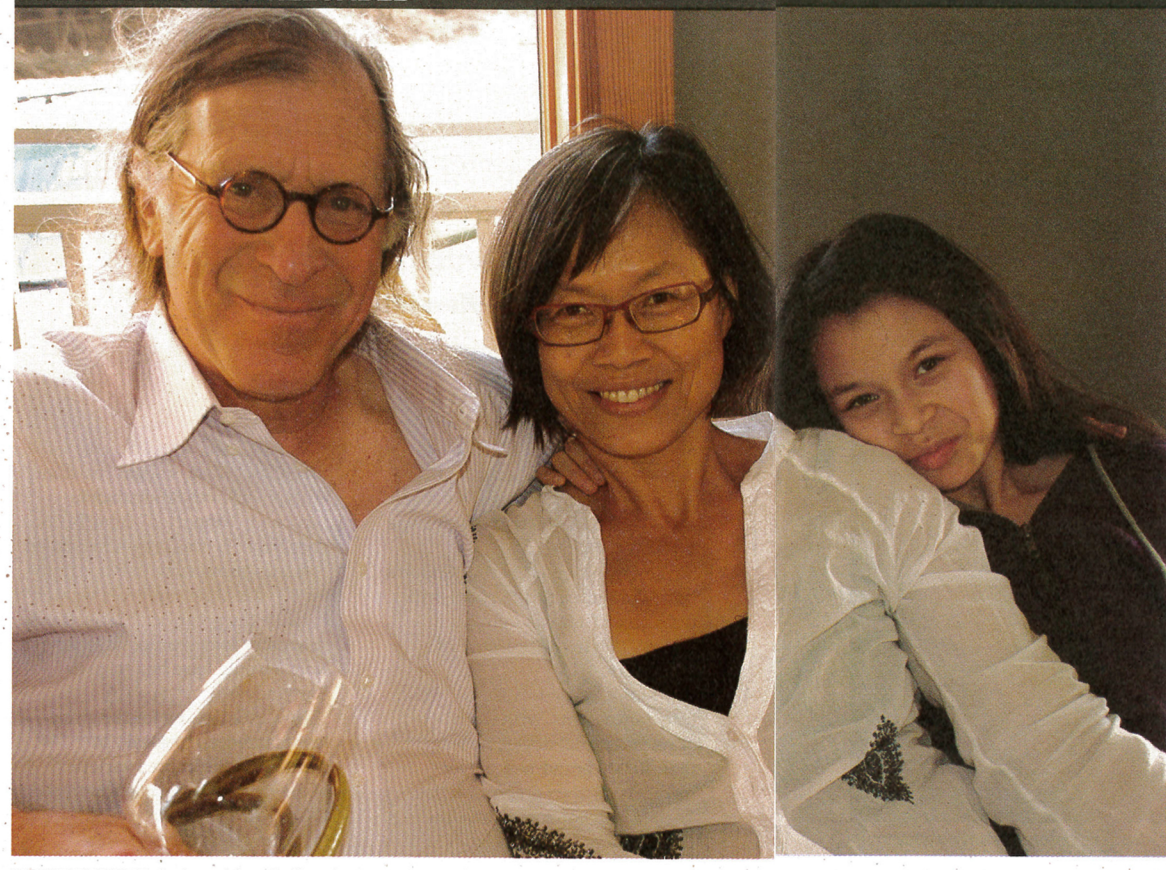
"I was obsessed with Pinot Noir for 30 years," he admits. "I wanted to make the great Pinot Noir. It was so stupid. To make a great Pinot Noir, I would have had to go to Burgundy."

Now he's looking for the grape less planted, so to speak. In addition to the unbred varieties of his Darwinian imagination, he's interested in Rossese, a Ligurian grape variety—"it's extremely obscure, aromatic, underappreciated," Grahm says.

Grahm is still getting to know this new estate landscape—the lay of the land, the microclimates, the best drainage and exposure to sun and shade. The property sits right on top of the San Andreas Fault.

"The soil is friggin' perfect," he proclaims. New olive trees form the estate allée all the way to the end of the road. It will take a hell of a lot of time, he admits, to raise the orchards of olives, pears, apples—not to mention grapes—that he's after. "We'll get a little Grenache this year," he says.

We set out to tour the property, driving very slowly up very primitive winding dirt roads. The views of the Salinas Valley below are stunning. Spectacular giant oaks decorate the hills and canyons. Two full-time workers—foreman Xavier Chavez and farm manager Nicole Walsh—oversee the 95 acres



HOME RANGER *Grahm with wife Chinshu Huang and daughter Amelie Grahm.*

of plantable land. Grahm clearly loves this place, which he named Popelouchum, from the native Mutsun inhabitants.

"It has lots of slopes, lovely soils, and great northeast-facing exposures," he says.

Grahm invited a geomancer when the property was purchased five years ago to check for auspicious aspects. "He chose this entrance," Grahm says, nodding in agreement. You want to be facing the Santa Clara side, not the Monterey side. In California, you don't want afternoon sun." That way lies vine sunburn and grape dehydration.

A spacious former horse stable contains the estate office, and perhaps winemaking facility-to-be. Carboys of pale (and obscure) wine age in the sun. Dry-farmed Mourvedre and Grenache climb a slope embraced by outcroppings of limestone.

"That would be a great cave. We could dig right into the limestone," he says, pointing and pursing his lips with pleasure. "The land has volcanic soil as well. We're still figuring it out. Best to do small plantings at first."

He gazes off toward the coast ranges, across his field of dreams. He wonders how much of the harvest of all the breeding, planting and nurturing he will actually see.

BEING RANDALL GRAHM

"Lots of wine schleppage through many of the 50 states" continues to eat up his time, time spent away from what he believes to be the proper work, which is growing grapes and enjoying his family. Like all winemakers today, Grahm is up against "a million other wines in the business, and nine-tenths of it is crap." So far he hasn't had much time to enjoy the new vineyard, either.

"I am nonetheless confident that the estate wines we will produce at San Juan Bautista will be truly world-class," he says.

In five years' time, Grahm hopes to have transitioned to a largely direct-to-consumer model. His crowdfunding initiative will help. Grahm says the Bonny Doon Vineyard tasting room in Davenport is working very well—"though in business, there's always room for improvement."

Artfully configured by the Stripe Design team, the tasting room offers "gimmicks" galore, including printing custom wine labels for customers with a photo of themselves inside the infamous Cigare Volant spaceship. "It's fun and could draw some incremental biz," he observes.

Grahm's current release favorites lean toward the reserve wines. "I am especially fond of the Vin Gris Réserve and 2011 Le Cigare Blanc Réserve. The 2011 Le Cigare Volant Reserve is also all killah, no fillah, as we say here in Santa Cruz."

BONNY DREAM

The estate occupies his imagination most these days. "Yes, this is a long-term project," he admits, "but it is an important project that will impact the entire wine industry, and change winemaking forever."

Nor is this a momentary whim. Chasing an authentic California terroir has been Grahm's passion for many years. Indeed, it could yield his most important legacy. In the last chapter of his award-winning 2009 wine text/memoir, *Been Doon So Long*, Grahm reflects that he has long defined himself as "the guy who is going to plant a great vineyard some day." And he insists that there is no way to produce great wine "apart from planting a vineyard *from scratch* with the intention of expressing the *terroir* of the site."

"Wines can have life force," he says. "They persist, they last. It seems to be related to the minerals. And minerals in the soil—strong terroirs—yield living wine."

Grahm is looking forward. "I don't want to go back. I've done the moneymakers. My role now is to discover, to explore the depth of this estate," he says, grinning that wry philosophical grin. "I feel like I'm at the beginning of my career."