

[WINE UNCORKED]

The Popelouchum Project

[BY DAVIES WAKEFIELD]

I have admired Randall Grahm from afar ever since reading about him in 1979, but when I heard that he was working on genetically modifying grapes to produce an entirely new type of wine my first reaction was the thought of the horror stories about GMO's (Genetically Modified Organisms).

We have all heard about GMO's. Who can forget genetically modified corn and soybeans that are resistant to herbicides, allowing farmers to spray more? ("Pass the

Roundup, Mom.") Or goats that have had their genes tweaked with spider DNA in order to produce milk that has spider web protein in it?

I'm saying ... I'm saying ... I'm an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But now the dream is over ... and the insect is awake. -- Seth Brundle in the movie "The Fly"

With that in mind, I decided to call Mr. Grahm who is "President for Life" of Bonny Doon Vineyards. What I discovered was a great story about entrepreneurship and idealism.

There is a fine line between genius and madness and Randall Grahm is operating right on that line. Mr. Grahm was a permanent liberal arts major at U. Cal Santa Cruz or as Mr. Grahm puts it, "Uncle Charlie's Summer Camp." His interest in wines started while he worked sweeping floors at the Wine Merchant in Beverly Hills, which, according to Randall, turned him into a complete and insufferable wine fanatic. Now obsessed with the idea of producing the Great American Pinot Noir (GAPN), Grahm got a degree in enology from the famed UC Davis and set up a vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains. While great Pinot escaped him, he did become fascinated with Rhone varietals. He noted that the conditions that led to great Rhone wines like Chateauf du Pape and Hermitage were similar to the area where he now raised grapes; hot and dry.

His tongue in cheek homage to the Rhone producers was Rhone style wine with a label designed to emulate the famous Vieux Télégraphe. The label pictures a UFO shaped like a cigar sending some kind of alien beam down to a vineyard, which spoofs the French law at the time forbidding flying saucers and cigars. The rest was history with an ever-expanding coterie of wineries exploiting the Rhone varieties. If you look on the shelves of your local wine merchants "Blends" section you will see the availability of the Rhone varieties has exploded.

Randall, ever the scientist and libertarian, wanted to take the next step toward new and uncharted waters and thought that creating a completely new grape variety with new flavors and genetic characteristics was what he wanted to do. Mr. Grahm's idea was to create a unique wine specifically

tied to the soils and climate of California. It would be a grape variety with unique organoleptic qualities; i.e. taste. At first glance, this sounds like an impossibility, until you know that the noble grape Cabernet Sauvignon was the result of crossing Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc. I wanted to know more about this endeavor, so I called the winery and asked to talk with Mr. Grahm. Randall replied to my questions via e-mail and elaborated on the taste he is seeking to create. His idea of uniqueness is a wine that "is Burgundian or Alpine in style with higher acidity than most grapes, not overly tannic, with a certain degree of 'open space' on the palate, and of course the ability to transmit a sense of minerality or persistence on the palate." He continued, "It is fragrant, complex, elegant; you can call it powerful weightlessness, if you will. Grenache, Gamay, Pinot, Tibouren/Rossese, Nebbiolo and Nerello mascalese can all exhibit some of these qualities when grown in the right spot. I am hoping that the varieties we choose will produce well balanced and flavorful wines at moderate levels of alcohol, as that is my stylistic predilection."

Randall chose a spot east of Castroville and south of Gilroy, California — the artichoke and garlic capitols of California respectively. The location of Popelouchum (poe-puh-loo-shoom) was based on Randall's feeling for the area. He named it for the Mutsun Indian dialect for the word "heaven." The Mutsun Indians inhabited this area near Monterey. From my perspective, this area would be the historical equivalent of Darwin's Galapagos Islands, where genetic diversity and isolation combined to create



One of Grahm's wine labels, complete with cigar-shaped UFO.

unique plant and animal species. In any regard, Randall is not going to let this gene recombination's take place by chance. He told me that he is "thinking that one parent has to be very robust, the other

teristics. Whether you wish to call this minerality or terroir or wines qi or life force, this is what makes wines interesting." The geology of the area that Randall is using for the project consists primarily of minute

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very sensitive and complex, though not sure which wants to be the female, which the male. Gouais Blanc was the parent (the mother, by all reckoning) of scores of noble vinifera varieties. Among the robust varieties are: Grenache, Cilieggiolo, Furmint, Tannat, and Ruche. The sensitive/complex varieties are: Pignolo, Nebbiolo, Ribolla gialla and Nero mascalese." The resulting wine would theoretically have the robustness of a Rhone wine like Chateauf du Pape and the complexity of a Burgundy like Vosne Romanee or La Tache. Randall went on to add that, "The wines need to be balanced but also possess a soulful depth, which I believe only comes from the pick-up of strong soil charac-

foraminifera to huge oyster shells deposited during the Cenozoic and Mesozoic periods. This limestone/seashell base is found in the best wine growing regions of the world and should contribute to a very distinct terroir.

Far from meddling with the individual genes of the variet-

ies, Randall will be creating his new varieties using methods that haven't changed much since Gregor Mendel created hybrid types of vegetables. Randall stated, "We will try to do the pollination very carefully, i.e. castrate the male parts of the flowers entirely, and then pollinate with pollen from a selected male parent, tying a paper bag over the cluster after that, done to insure that the right pollen is doing the job." Randall also said that he would leave the gene tweaking to the UC Davis team that has germplasm that is resistant to powdery mildew and Pierce's disease.

Thinking about the idea of creating a completely new variety made me inquire about how Randall brought this idea into existence reminded me of a quote from George Bernard Shaw who famously said, "Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine, and at last you create what you will."

I asked Randall, "Do you frequently dream about your ideas and then will them into existence?"

He replied, "That's the plan."

I hope to live long enough to try an idea that was turned into a wine. ■