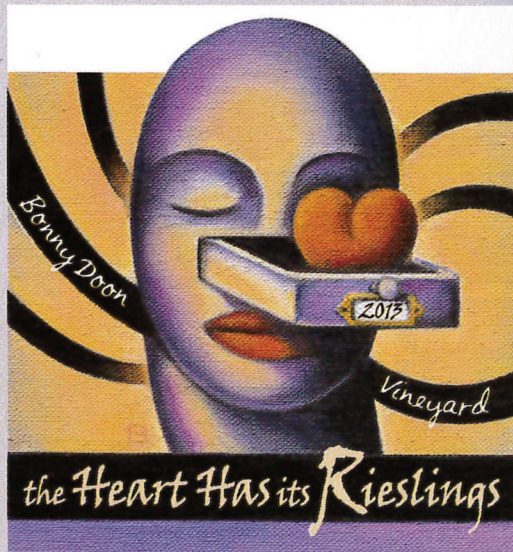


Vines, Wines, & Label Designs

Labels tell
the wine's story at
Bonny Doon Vineyard

By Stacey Vreeken



When you make iconic wines, you need iconic ways to say what's inside. The wines of Bonny Doon Vineyard push boundaries while honoring the heritage that defines a great wine. The labels partner with the vintages, telling their stories while revealing the witty vision of the founder and winemaker.

Randall Graham is an innovator, popularizing Rhone varietals and pioneering different ways to barrel and age wines, while always open to new possibilities. He is known worldwide for his engaging personality and singular wines. Bonny Doon Vineyard wine labels are similarly visionary, employing irony, exuberance, and Old World appeal with a New World twist, oftentimes using

(Center) Randall Graham in Bonny Doon's Popelouchum Vineyard.
(Left) the Heart Has its Rieslings 2013, designed by Bascove.
(Right) Cardinal Zin 2003, designed by Ralph Steadman.



Photo: Jonathan Ramirez Images: © Bonny Doon Vineyards



(Above) A label for Bonny Doon's Exclusive wine club, Distinctive Esoteric Wine Network, designed by Gary Taxali.



(Above) 2016 Bonny Doon Vineyard Verdejo, designed by Lindsey Sonu.

well-known artists such as Ralph Steadman. Graham made a splash in the wine world with Le Cigare Volant, a Rhone blend, which has become its flagship vintage. At the time, in the mid-1980s, no California vintners were making this type of wine.

"The whole idea of Cigare Volant just kind of came to me in a bit of a vision," Graham said. "... Remember, this was a new category of wine—Rhone varieties grown in California. And no one knew anything about it." The challenge was introducing it to the wine drinking public. Graham acknowledges the legacy of European wines, and the tension it creates for any wine defining itself outside of it.

"In the New World, how do we define ourselves in terms of the Old World? Do we want to be copycats? Do we want to be derivative? Do we want to be completely different? ... It's one of the underlying questions. How am I going to answer this question with this wine?" the winemaker said. "I needed to make a reference to Old World style, to Chateaufort du Pape, but on the other hand, even then, I didn't want to come off as being derivative or copycat or a second-best facsimile. But I wanted to somehow create a connection."

Working with graphic artist Chuck House, who was also just at the beginning of



(Right) A selection of Bonny Doon vintages with labels designed by their talented artists.



(Left) Bonny Doon Critique of Pure Riesling, designed by Ralph Steadman
(Above) 2005 Bonny Doon Vineyard Pinot Gris Gonzo, designed by Tavis Coburn.

a successful career, Grahm linked the old and the new with a bit of humor.

"The way to do this is to spoof a very serious Old World label and do something subversive in it. To refer to the Old World but also suggest we're not in the Old World anymore either," he said. House used French art images of a vineyard and chateau with a looming Jules Verne cigar-shaped spacecraft, beaming its otherworldly light over the field. Thus an icon was born. The artist also designed labels for Old Telegram and Pacific Rim Riesling, among others, winning design awards along the way.

"It's really a great lucky coincidence that he and I have collaborated so well over the years," said Grahm, who continues to work with House. "I'm so lucky to have worked with brilliant artists over the years. There's a whole range of different artists. Each one has his own style, and each one his own modus. It's different for each of them. You can't communicate with Ralph Steadman the way you communicate with Chuck House, or with Bas-cov or Gary Taxali. They all have their unique idiosyncrasies."

Add artists Grady McFerrin, Wendy Cook, Tavis Coburn, and Robert Johnson to Grahm's list. Which leads us right to Ralph Steadman, the artist who illustrated Hunter S. Thompson's "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." In the 1980s, the Welsh artist did design work for Oddbins, a British chain that carried Bonny Doon Vineyard wines.

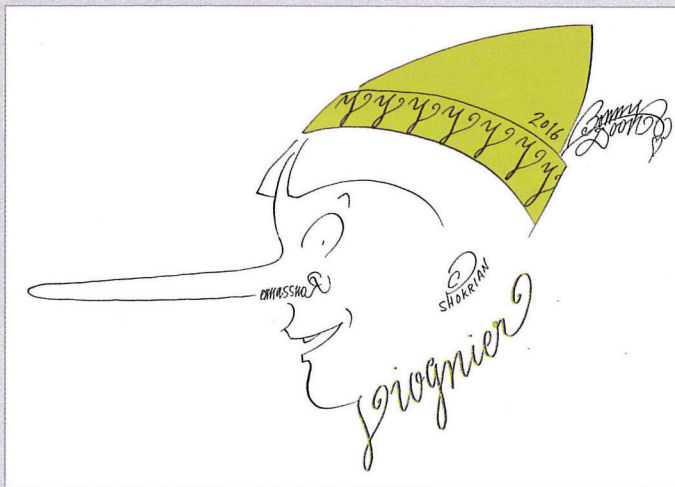
"Ralph and I hit it off, and Ralph agreed

to do some labels for us," Grahm said. A visit to the Catalyst in Santa Cruz, which was an extremely groovy fern bar back then, inspired the artist and the Oddbins chain to ask for a vintage be named The Catalyst. Anyone who remembers those days of the wild art-draped bar would understand its appeal to Steadman.

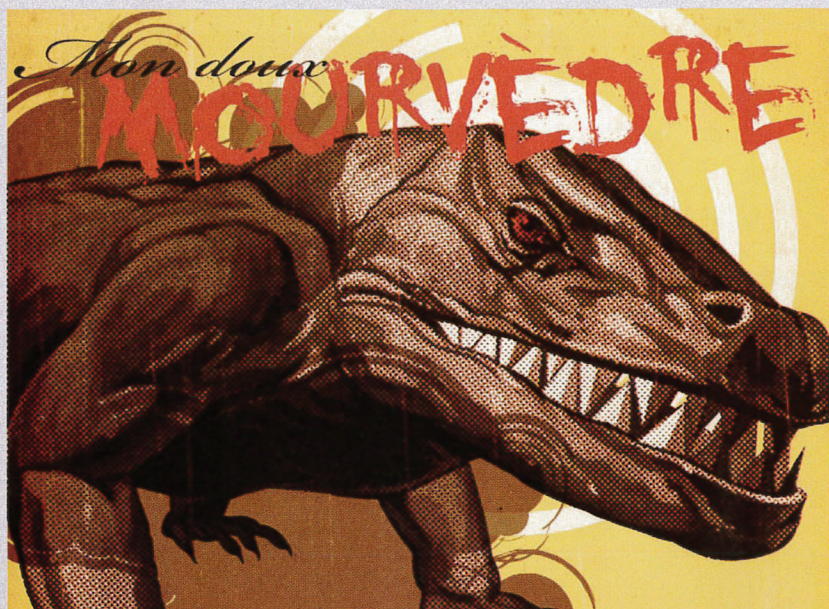
"He's irascible," Grahm said with a bit of a twinkle in his voice. "He's very opinionated. If you tell Ralph, 'I'd like this to be X,' the only thing you know for sure is that it will not be X. It will be not-X. There's a whole technique

in working with Ralph. Which is basically let Ralph be Ralph. You have no other choice. You might as well get on with it." A retrospective of Steadman's work just opened at the Haight Street Art Center in San Francisco. Steadman's labels include Cardinal Zin (a 'beastly old wine' banned in Ohio), Heart of Darkness, and Critique of Pure Riesling.

On the other end of the spectrum is Bas-cov, "a real collaborationist," who illustrates for A Proper Claret, The Heart Has It's Rieslings, and the Il Circo labels. Her Technicolor labels employ immediately recognizable



(Above) 2016 Bonny Doon Vineyard Viognier Shokrian Vineyard Santa Barbara County, designed by Wendy Cook.



(Above) 2010 Bonny Doon Vineyard Mourvedre Mon Doux, designed by Tavis Coburn.



(Above) Il Circo Il Domatore di Leoni Montepulciano 2003, designed by Bascove.

archetypes. "I adore working with Bascove," said Grahm. "She gives it a very sincere effort and takes what she does very seriously." Bonny Doon Vineyard employs Lindsey Sonu as design and media manager, and she also does her share of labels.

While first and foremost the winery is about the wine, the packaging is "important to tell your story," Grahm said. "That's the opportunity you have. We are a visual culture. It's very important that there be congruity outside of the bottle and the inside, at least if you want someone to buy a second bottle."

His distributor told him that no one would buy a bottle of wine with a prison on it. Grahm thought it was "pretty funny and cool looking." It turned out, plenty of folks agreed and bought Big House Red, making it a huge commercial success. Today, outlaw themed wines abound.

"The point is, if you take a lot of pains in making the wine, as one hopes one does, you want to take sufficient attention to detail on the entire package. You want to be thoughtful in your design," Grahm said. "It needs to be beautiful. It needs to be appealing. It needs to tell your story. It needs to set the expectations correctly about the wine. Maybe it's a feeling that the wine evokes."

Sometimes the meaning is implicit and sometimes it's hidden.

"We always like to add some extra attention to detail that you wouldn't necessarily see on first glance. This would be the treats hidden in the label," said Grahm, pointing out a Bascove designed label that features "SB loves Sem," a love letter from one grape to another in the Sauvignon Blanc-Semillion blend. "Odd details like that we like to include just because we can," he said. "There needs to be discovery, if you will."

Grahm envisions a time when his wines become so "compelling and authoritative the labels themselves will not have to do as much heavy lifting." In his view, with a brilliant wine, understatement can be more eloquent.

"I feel incredibly privileged to have been able to participate in this process," Grahm said. "I had no idea when I got into the wine business, I'd have anything to do with working on art direction or label design. It's been such an enormously fulfilling, satisfying activity for me over the years. An unexpected joy. I didn't really imagine I had an artistic bone in my body. Somehow being able to kibbitz on label design has been a very fruitful activity for me. Who knew?"

The rest of us have known Randall Grahm as an artist for a long time. ☺