

Searching for a New World Grape

Winemaker Randall Grahm leaves legacy in sense of place

By Stacey Vreeken



Photo: Nicoledi Giorgio

(Above) Known as "The Rhône Ranger," Randall Grahm was a pioneer of Rhône varieties in California.

Winemaker Randall Grahm had a dream. It involved 400 acres of land near San Juan Bautista, where he's now realizing his vision of developing a vineyard that expresses a true sense of place, or terroir.

"I dreamt about this property, and then I saw it," Grahm said. "And that was sort of a confirmation that I thought that it might be the right spot. There's a spiritual quality to the place I find compelling. The geology, soil typology, is extremely interesting and diverse. The exposures are interesting; it's mostly northeast and northern-facing exposures. It's just a compelling piece of land on all fronts."

That dream, in reality, is an extension of Grahm's vision for his Bonny Doon Vineyard.

"The main thrust is to make wines that matter, to make wines that are utterly differentiated from everything else and have a real reason for being, that are not generic but are unique and distinctive and make the world more interesting," Grahm said.

Instead of trying to make grapes grown in the New World taste like the Old World, Grahm is on a search to create wines that taste of where they are grown, even if that means creating a new grape. In addition to traditional grapes, such as Grenache, to be biodynamically dry farmed, plant crossbreeding experiments will fine-tune varieties to the site. Another experiment involves creating 10,000 new strains of grapes in the quest for a unique New World wine.

He's named his estate Popelouchum, the Matsyn, a band of the Ohlone people, word for paradise. Grahm described the estate as "a random plantation with all sorts of things growing, not in rows, just somewhat randomly." He hopes to find a grape strain with flavor characteristics that are as unique as his worldview.

"Might something special happen when you make a wine composed of a genetically diverse group of individuals?" he asked. "They haven't made wine this way for 150 years, since before phylloxera, when seeds would fall and spontaneously germinate."



(Spread) Popelouchum, the Matsun word for paradise, is a 400 acre tract of land near San Juan Bautista, which has become the beginning of Randall Grahm's dream vineyard.

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(Above) A collection of wine-filled barrels at Boony Doon's westside winery wait patiently for bottling.

(Below) Afternoon sun warms grapes at Popelouchum vineyard.

Phylloxera is an aphid-like pest native to the Eastern United States that destroys grapevines. In the early 1860s, it was unknowingly spread to Europe by botanists fascinated with New World plants. By the end of the 1880s, the pest was responsible for destroying almost two-thirds of European vineyards, by some estimates. There is no cure or chemical response to this pest, and at the time, winemakers struggled to make tasty wine from American grapes. Vintners responded to the problem by grafting European varietals to resistant American rootstock. Most of today's vineyards around the world are planted this way.

"We have virgin territory," Grahm said. "We can grow seeds without rootstock. That's an opportunity we should take advantage of."

How many people have told him he's crazy?

"Most everyone," he said.

Grahm has heard it all before, but is undeterred. He once referred to himself as the Jerry Lewis of wine—popular in France but laughed at in his native country. He has taken that laugh to the bank a couple of times now, selling off his popular wine blends

Cardinal Zin, Big House Red, and Pacific Rim. He retains a devoted following ready to try his latest venture, even if it's curing wine for nine months outside in a glass container.

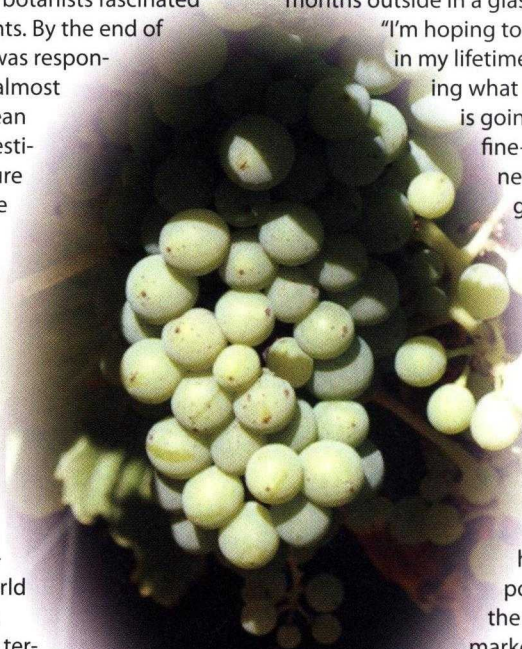
"I'm hoping to plant the vineyard in my lifetime, but understanding what you've got planted is going to take longer (to fine-tune or develop a new grape)," he said. "It's going to take some years to sort out. Perhaps my daughter, if she has any interest, let's hope, might learn something, or individuals significantly younger than I am."

Putting his agile mind to work on the problem, Grahm has suggested the power of computation, the detection of genetic markers, and possible use of artificial intelligence to streamline the process without having to micro-vinify all of the samples.

So far, it's early days for Popelouchum. Three acres are planted with fruiting varieties, another nine acres with rootstock of the 85 acres suitable for grapes.

"We've got a way to go," said Grahm.

Right now, the tasting room stays right where it is, in Davenport, but Grahm wants to move his cellar from the West Side of Santa Cruz to the San Juan Bautista site, to "make





(Above) Bonny Doon Vineyard's tasting room in Davenport provides a good excuse for a drive up our North Coast. (Below) A sample of 2015 *I Am Not Drinking Any \$%&*#! Merlot* is poured at Bonny Doon Vineyard's tasting room.

that the locus" of what he is doing.

"Politically, climatically, geopolitically, culturally, it's where all the counties intersect—San Benito, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Santa Clara. It's a portal to the Santa Clara Valley. It's the tail end of Monterey Bay and of course the faults," Graham said. "It's a nexus of a lot of different spheres of influence."

While the winemaker doesn't necessarily expect a new grape in his lifetime, he is trying "to create a set conditions to allow for something unusual to manifest itself, as we say in Santa Cruz, in the hope that I, or somebody, has the wit to discern something unusual has emerged."

Graham does have at least one thing going in his favor: California's freewheeling regulations regarding grape-growing and winemaking.

"We can grow grapes essentially anywhere," he said. "Any kind of grape, anywhere we want, with any kind of trellis system, or any kind of training system, or planting density." Noting this freedom and latitude, he also conceded that he has no idea what resulting flavor profile, if any, will come about.

He also wants to grow grapes with biodynamic practices, dry farming as much as possible, to concentrate the flavors the site produces, bringing out its terroir. But he finds this concept to be a hard sell.

"I think ultimately the French are onto this notion of terroir," he said. "If you're a novice wine drinker in California, you don't get it. You just don't get this whole terroir thing.

Why should I be interested in terroir? It's too hard, too complicated. The wines are not going to be fruity. They are not going to be accessible. They're going to be difficult, like French people. But ultimately once you get over that psychological hump, terroir is actually what makes wine really interesting."

Selling a wine by its varietal doesn't excite Graham. He finds the uniqueness of its terroir more compelling.

"You don't want to be selling a commodity. You want to sell something unique," he said. "You want to be proposing something more special, essentially not replicable."

Bonny Doon Vineyard's most well-known wine is a Rhone-style blend *Le Cigre Volant*, what Graham called a "composed wine," using grapes from four different geographies.

"Bonny Doon wines definitely have a certain fingerprint and stylistic imprint, but ultimately we want to get beyond that to somehow capture and transfer some of the unique site characteristics that will persist long after I'm gone," he said. "I think that it's an opportunity to think about wines in

a different way. A way to think about what California and the New World can do that the Old World can't do easily—or at all. It's an opportunity perhaps for the New World to get out from the shadow of the Old World, to define itself on its own terms."

