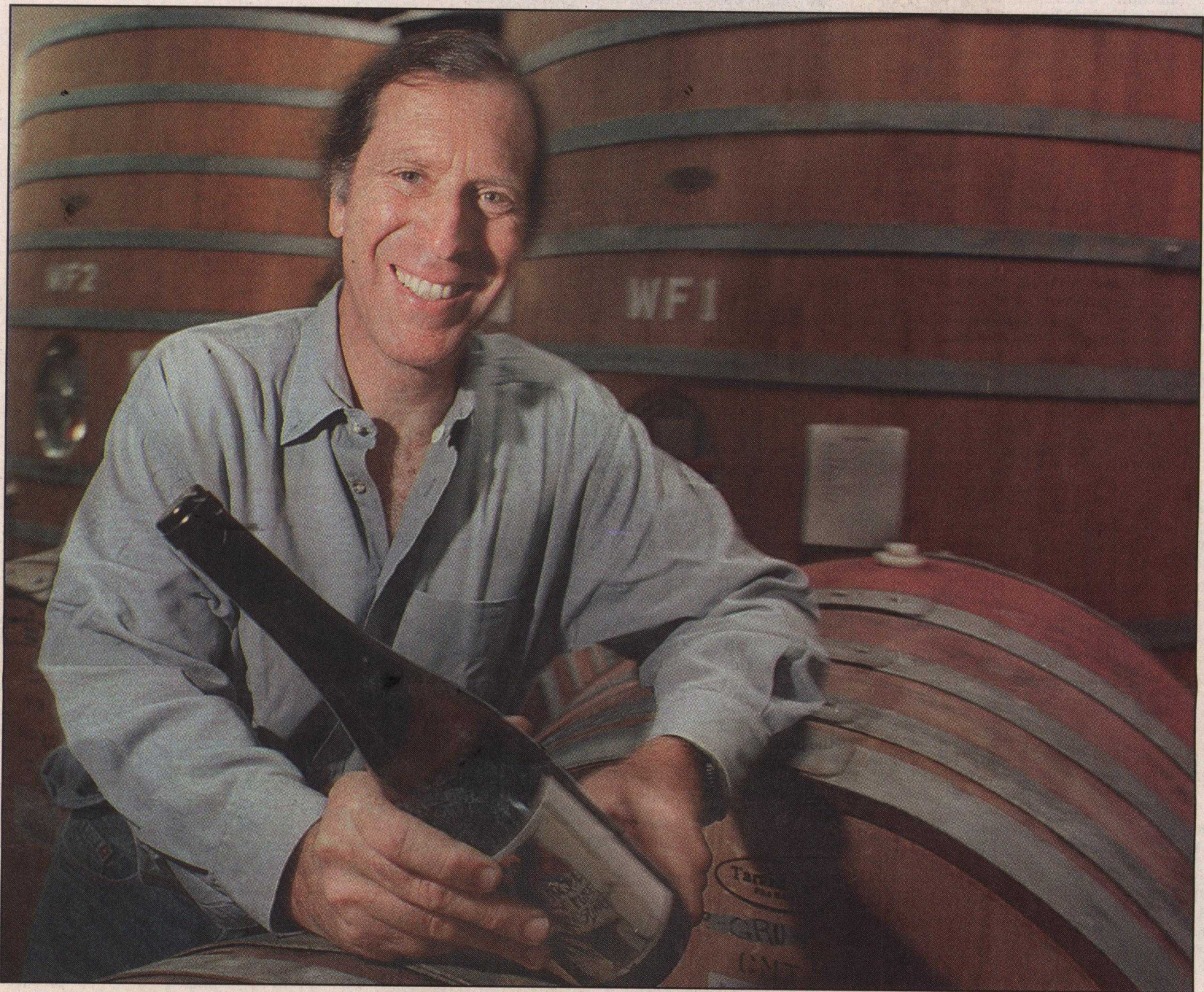


All the right RIESLINGS



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyards with a bottle of his Pacific Rim Riesling.

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Wine & wine making

There is a point where something is so nerdy it crosses over into hipness. Cat's-eye glasses for one. Floppy fishing hats for another. Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyard has something to add to that list.

Riesling wine. "It's totally passé," says the man who is arguably Santa Cruz's most famous winemaker, "but it is also the hippest wine of the moment, as it turns out."

So, Graham is celebrating this humble-but-hot wine with a \$125 dinner and tasting Friday that will feature pourings by 11 of the biggest names in German winemaking.

He calls it, in typically irreverent Graham style, "You Gimme Riesling to Live."

It's the way Graham is. Where others might list their high-flying accomplishments, Graham's biography touts his attendance at "Uncle Charlie's Summer Camp, excuse me, the prestigious University of California at Santa Cruz" and credits his sweeping job at a Beverly Hills wine shop for turning him into "a complete and insufferable wine fanatic."

But behind that David Spade exterior is a man with impeccable credentials. He has won a James Beard award for his

This wine is so humble, it's hot

winemaking and has been the focus of national magazine and newspaper articles.

When Graham says Riesling is the next best thing, you gotta believe him.

PART POET and part a student of pop culture, Graham calls riesling the Buddy Love of wine — a reference to the Jerry Lewis character in "The Nutty Professor" who was transformed from an insecure bumbler into a cool Casanova.

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In the '70s, says Graham, side-burned men and women in fringe wouldn't be caught without their glass of Riesling. But, like disco, riesling fell out of flavor and was replaced by white zinfandels and chardonnays.

Now Riesling's back on the dance floor, Graham insists. "The reason is, Riesling actually complements modern food, fusion food" says Graham, who has invited chef David McMillan from Los Angeles to prepare a meal for his Riesling extravaganza.

Fusion food's blend of various world cuisines creates sweet and savory flavors that clash with a buttery, oaky chardonnay.

Riesling is the perfect pairing. But, says Graham, don't trust his word.

This year, his Bonny Doon Vineyard expects to sell 40,000 cases of its Pacific Rim Riesling.

Nationally, Riesling also made a surprising showing last year, according to the Wine Institute in San Francisco.

Riesling came in third in sales behind chardonnay and sauvignon blanc, in a report by A.C. Nielsen WineScan which measures supermarket wine sales across the country.

But Graham says Riesling's big day is still coming and the reason is because it is a wine of high art, a wine with soul.

"It's like a song, a flower," he says.

Usually lighter in alcohol (about 8 or 9 percent), this wine doesn't attract drinkers because of its buzz.

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Riesling wines

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Rather, Graham says, Riesling is a metaphor for life.

"To me, it holds the possibility of transformation; that if a wine, a lowly grape, can be transformed into an amazing, exotic, yellow-submarine like flavor, then there exists the possibility for us to transform ourselves as well," he says.

And Graham means every word he says.

So do the 11 winemakers he has gathered, people Graham calls "my heroes."

Some, like Carl von Schubert of Mertesdorf winery and J.J. Prum of Wehlen winery are supervising vineyards that have been in operation for 500 years. Their wines are not the sugary-sweet Rieslings people remember, but complex, often dry wines that are a fine dinner partner, Graham says.

So, the winemakers and Graham

will be pouring their wares to accompany Warm Truffled Trout and Potato Salad with Caviar and Poached Quail Eggs, and Auslese Glazed Port Loin with Small Root Vegetables, Stoned Fruit and Asian Aromatics.

And Graham will be in good spirits.

"I identify with Riesling grape, of course" says Graham.

"I identify with ugly duckling grapes that are misunderstood."

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