

REQUIEM FOR A LABEL



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel



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TOP: Bonny Doon Vineyard's Randall Graham wants to return to making the varieties of wine that started him in the business. **ABOVE:** Vicente Garcia Jr. tends to casks of pinot noir at Bonny Doon Vineyard's winery on the Westside of Santa Cruz.

BONNY DOON PUTS EMPHASIS BACK IN ARCANE AFTER SELLING BIG HOUSE, CARDINAL ZIN WINES

By **GWEN MICKELSON**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Behind round-framed glasses, winemaker Randall Graham's eyes closed for a moment as he paused in recollection of his days at UC Santa Cruz.

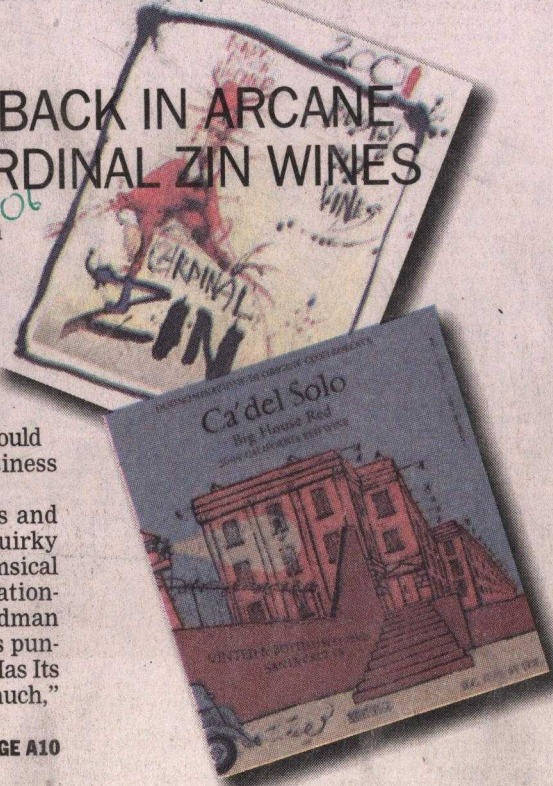
"Absence of letter grades, proximity to the beach and the 1970s," said Graham, 53, owner of Bonny Doon Vineyard, in summation of his time at the City on a Hill. "It gave me sensitivity to the underachievers, the late bloomers, the ugly ducklings."

That attention to the marginalized and the overlooked, as well as a sort of anti-marketing approach, are partly behind Bonny Doon Vineyard's success, said Graham, long considered a maverick, an eccentric and an innova-

tor in the wine industry. Graham started the winery in 1983, and it became the highest-producing winery in Santa Cruz County.

But his most recent move — selling off his two largest and most well-known brands, Big House and Cardinal Zin — would confound any hard-boiled business type.

The sheer number of wines and the volume coming from his quirky business — known for its whimsical or irreverent labels by international artists such as Ralph Steadman and Gary Taxali, as well as its pun-infused names, such as Heart Has Its Rieslings — "just got to be too much,"



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Randall Grahm up close **Wine**

The owner of the self-described 'weird and wacky' Bonny Doon Vineyard is known as 'an innovator and a great marketer and very funny and intelligent



person,' according to Patrice Boyle, owner of Soif Wine Bar, who worked at the vineyard for 12 years. Grahm was candid with the Sentinel on a number of topics.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU DRINK WINE?

Four to five nights a week. Temperately, I might add.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE WINE OUTSIDE OF BONNY DOON?

For white, an older Riesling Spatlese from the Moselle (Valley of Germany); for red, a fine, juicy Burgundy.

HOW ABOUT YOUR FAVORITE BONNY DOON WINE?

The wine of the future.

WHERE IS YOUR FAVORITE PLACE TO DRINK WINE IN SANTA CRUZ?

Soif.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF (EXTREME-VALUE-PRICED CHARLES SHAW WINES) 'TWO-BUCK CHUCK'?

(Does not answer, but gives a thumbs-down gesture.)

WHERE DO YOU BUY WINE?

Mostly in San Francisco, but also in Palo Alto at Vin Vino Wine, and Kermit Lynch in Berkeley.

WHAT ARE YOU READING?

I just finished 'The Omnivore's Dilemma,' by Michael Pollan, which I recommend to everyone.

WHAT WINE PUBLICATIONS DO YOU READ?

The World of Fine Wine and Decanter.

ARE YOU INTO ART?

I like looking at art. Maybe my tastes are philistine, but they're pretty eclectic. I love impressionists, as does everyone.

For information about Bonny Doon Vineyard, visit www.bonnydoonvineyard.com.

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he said.

The sale, to The Wine Group LLC of San Francisco, and the relocation of another brand will take Bonny Doon's annual output from about 450,000 cases to about 45,000 cases.

"It's an order of magnitude," said Grahm. "It's not trivial."

Bending toward biodynamics

Standing among massive upright oak tanks at the actual winery on Santa Cruz's Westside — a tasting room is now the vineyard's only Bonny Doon connection — Grahm talked about his direction now that he's unloaded his mass-market brands.

He's interested in biodynamic wines, he said, which the sale will allow him to focus on. Biodynamics is a nonchemical, preorganic-movement method of agriculture that seeks to "work with the health-giving forces of nature," according to the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association.

"I want to produce wines that are interesting and distinctive and make the world incrementally better," Grahm said.

Local wine industry experts are watching in anticipation.

"I can't wait to see what he's got going this time," said Ryan Beauregard, winemaker at Beauregard Vineyards in Santa Cruz.

Industry insiders hadn't expected the move, but then again, "nothing surprises me a lot about Randall Grahm," said David Rickenbaker, manager of San Francisco wine retailer K&L Wine Merchants. "He's kind of bizarre. But he's been extremely good for the wine business ... he brought some real innovation. He really was kind of a renegade."

Though Rickenbaker was surprised that Grahm sold, "a lot of us understand why he did it — to get smaller, get back to basics and have a little more control."

Rickenbaker doesn't think Grahm will ever stop being innovative, he said, "but it's harder to do when you get that big."

Bonny Doon will keep producing its Cigare family wines, sangiovese, a new dessert wine from roussanne and grenache blanc grapes, and syrah from the Central Coast. It will also continue its DEWN (Distinctive Esoteric Wine Network) program, a wine club specializing in experimental offerings. Its previous roster of more than 30 wines will be reduced to eight.

Marketing vs. winemaking

Among the elements that played into

Grahm's decision was that the business was "a highly leveraged company with quite a bit of debt," he said. He declined, however, to discuss how much the deal with The Wine Group was worth.

But other reasons were more personal, he said.

Grahm felt the company's interest in marketing had overtaken the winemaking. Its marketing, which Grahm said is popular because of "the lack of study, the artlessness that's very refreshing for some people," nonetheless has gained detractors who see everything as a cynical marketing ploy, he said.

Others in the industry say the marketing made the wine business, and learning about wine, fun.

"As intellectual as Randall is, he's also funny, so I've never felt like it was a snobby thing," said Patrice Boyle, owner of downtown Santa Cruz's Soif Wine Bar. Boyle worked for Bonny Doon from 1987-1999. "In the wine business, that's really valuable because it's important for people not to be intimidated by it."

Still, said Grahm, he wanted to "return to the fundamentals of the business, which is wine itself."

Another development in his life forced him to reanalyze everything. His daughter, Amelie, was born in 2003, when he was 49.

"When you have a child, you can't be quite as big of a hypocrite as you were," he said. "I felt that I had been somewhat hypocritical in speaking out in defense of terroir wines and original wines, whereas my own wines didn't really support that."

The concept of terroir, originally a French term, has taken on the meaning of a sense of place, referring to wines that are distinctive and unique to their place of origin.

The decision to sell wasn't easy, since one-third of the company's nearly 75 staff members, from various parts of the country, had to be laid off.

Sweet sorrow

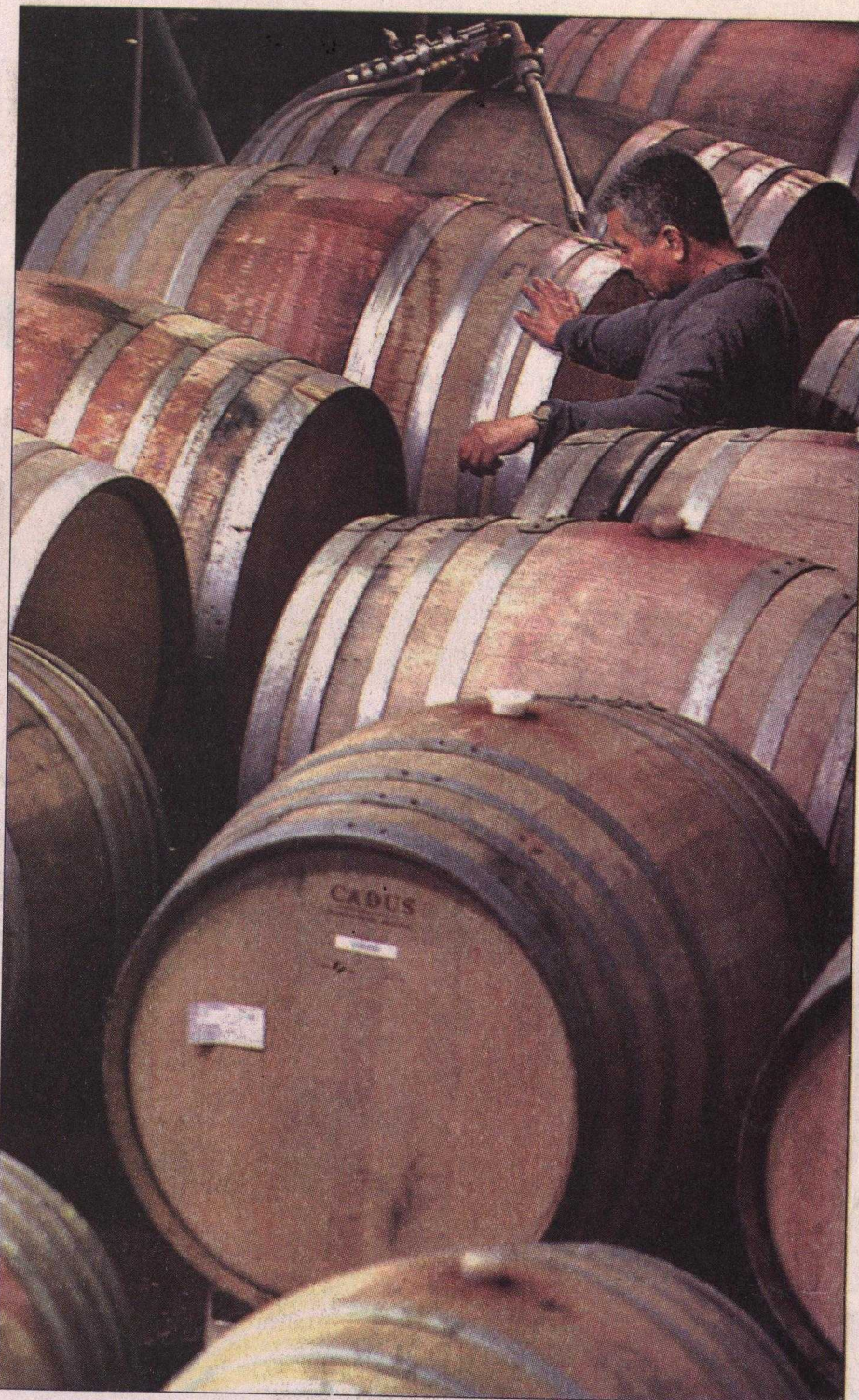
The parting with Big House and Cardinal Zin is a bittersweet relief.

"Big House was a security blanket," said Grahm. "It was so big, and the company was so big, it had a certain mass to it that you felt nothing would go wrong."

Bonny Doon is internationally known, according to Boyle, who said she's spotted Bonny Doon T-shirts in Italy, Paris and Germany.

Now, said Grahm, things are both exciting and scary, a bit like working without a net, even though the company's value-priced 120,000-case-per-year Pacific Rim brand, which is being moved to Washington and will operate separately, will provide some insurance.

The company is now seeking out vine-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Polo Barerra prepares pinot noir for bottling at Bonny Doon Vineyard's Swift Street winery. The company recently downsized its winemaking production.

yards to buy or lease, so that it can control the quality of its grapes and ensure they are grown biodynamically, as well as reconsidering the grape varieties it grows at its 125-acre Soledad vineyard.

Planting the vineyards, said Grahm. And after that, making "great wine, unusual wine, startling wine."

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So what's next for Bonny Doon?