

## Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon

## Fledgling Wine Maker Gets Off to an Impressive Start in Santa Cruz Area

By NATHAN CHROMAN

For a young graduate enologist, the acquisition of vineyards and the founding of a winery is a virtual financial impossibility. Sky-high start-up costs force even the most talented to work for prospering high-volume wineries, or for cost-conscious boutiques at wages that do not put much wine on the table. Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon Vineyards is a rare vintner; with parental assistance he established his own winery before he was 30.

Not overflowing with dollars, Grahm started with a five-acre vineyard in the noted turn-of-the-century Bonny Doon wine district of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Other wineries and would-be vintners located in this area include Jim Beauregard, who plans to rebuild the Locatelli Winery for sparkling wine, and McHenry Vineyards, founded by Dean McHenry, a retired chancellor of UC Santa Cruz.

## Highly Valued Land

Bonny Doon, once a highly prized viticultural region, was especially favored by two of California's greatest wine pioneers: Ben Lomond, who owned as many as 1,000 acres, and Prof. Eugene Hilgard, one of the two men credited with stopping phylloxera during the 1870s. UC Davis maintained a research station there in the 1930s and '40s.

Grahm, at 32, believes Bonny Doon can produce the world's finest wines, even though one of California's greatest wine experts, Dr. Albert Winkler, advised that the region was appropriate only for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. With unceasing optimism, Grahm planted not only these grapes, but also a range of Rhone varieties, such as Syrah, Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier. Blocks of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec and Petit Verdot for his proprietary Bordeaux blend were also included. Interestingly, Charles Sullivan, a California wine historian, informed Grahm that Marsanne, a white wine grape from Provence, was successfully grown in the Santa Cruz Mountains around 1900.

Grahm is devoted to and fascinated by Burgundy and



"Even though you're a wine writer,  
I prefer her description of this  
Riesling: 'It's just to die for!'"

Rhone wines, and his wine styles are targeted along Gallic lines, unusual for a young American enologist generally not exposed to French wine.

While taking a break from working on a college thesis, he worked at a Beverly Hills wine shop, where he was drawn to the older vintages and tastes of Bordeaux, Burgundy and Rhone. This prompted studies at UC Davis in viticulture and enology, while

several trips to Europe further refined and entrenched his interest in French wine-making techniques and grape culture.

Because of the immaturity of his own plantings, Grahm produces wine from the best grapes available in a range of areas, from Mendocino to Monterey and even beyond, to Oregon, for Pinot Noir grapes from the Willamette Valley. To my knowledge, this had never been done by a California-based vintner.

Bonny Doon, Willamette Valley, Pinot Noir, 1983 (to be released in March) is blessed with excellent Pinot Noir character, and though light in structure and style, the wine provides fine elegance and drinkability. Grahm describes its nose as a "fresh sappy character" that is typical of fine Oregon Pinot Noir, a standard he admires. It is attractive and easy to drink at 12% alcohol.

## Elegant, Exciting Red

An exciting red is Bonny Doon, Syrah, (Paso Robles) 1983, produced from Australian cuttings. Not overpowering, with no hard edges, the wine's elegant, intense flavor easily qualifies it as a fine table wine in a Rhone-like style. It is most desirable for those who want to avoid high tannin, long-term aging, and harsh, robust structure; the 1984 is expected to be even more of a classic Rhone with longer barrel aging, perhaps two years.

A Grahm original is his Vin Gris' de Pinot Noir (Cuvee 823) non-vintage from Sonoma, made from 81% Pinot Noir and 19% Chardonnay. It's a blend of two vintages, about 80% 1983 and 20% 1982. *Vin Gris* is a French term describing pale rose wines, especially those produced from black grapes. Here is a lush, somewhat fat, 12% alcohol, creamy, rich wine. It has a crisp acidity and a touch of Pinot Noir aroma that makes pleasant drinking. Not to be considered a pink wine, it has a subtle fruitiness that leaves a slight impression of sweetness, although the wine is completely dry. A well-styled, innovative California wine, it is entirely barrel-fermented in Siregue oak, and at \$6 it will attract devoted fans.

Three other reds that caught my fancy were Vin

Rouge 1982; Claret, Mendocino 1982, and Claret, Mendocino 1983. Grahm's use of generic names has been more of a detriment to his marketing than has his French-style wine making. He is intent on following his French taste orientation, and the generic labels truly reflect his personal styles.

Best of the bunch is Claret 1983, which provides a lovely, minty, eucalyptus nose with the depth of flavor generally found in expensive Cabernets and French claret. There is deep color here and a silkiness and intensity that warrants its tab of \$9. Claret 1982, a leaner wine, perhaps a bit delicate, showed some nose vegetativeness, but in several years it should come around with fragrance and elegance in a style departure from California Cabs, leaning again to claret.

Especially innovative is Vin Rouge 1982, produced 60% from Cabernet, 37% from Grenache and 3% from Merlot. Here is a light, flavorful style with a measure of elegance and enough Grenache to influence both nose and taste. Grapes are from a 45-year-old dry-farmed vineyard in Gilroy, and at \$7.50 it is worth a taste.

Least fascinating is Grahm's Chardonnay, LaReina Vineyard, Monterey 1983, which was made from grapes grown in the northern part of Monterey County and barrel fermented in Siregue oak. A citrus-like nose, overly assertive Chardonnay fruit and a crisp lemony finish produced a wine that may be difficult to match with food. Age may subdue its fruity flavor emphasis.

This fledgling wine maker's wines are well made and represent an impressive beginning. Certainly it is not an everyday occurrence to watch a young, idealistic palate-seasoned wine maker fashion the grape simply as he tastes it. If more such young enologists were blessed with a similar opportunity, it could be a California wine-making breakthrough of historic proportion.

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