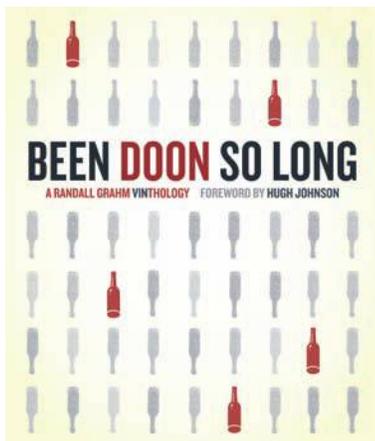


CAROLYN DE LA PEÑA

## Interview with Randall Graham



Carolyn de la Peña of *Boom* recently sat down with Randall Graham, proprietor of Bonny Doon Vineyard, to ask him about biodynamic winemaking, his views on California wines and their aficionados, and the past and present of his vineyard. Graham is author of *Been Doon So Long: A Randall Graham Vinthology*, winner of the James Beard Award and the Georges Duboeuf Best Wine Book award. He describes organic winemaking as a *wabi-sabi* approach to the craft, an approach that embraces imperfection as an essential element of the beautiful and the natural. It is through their flaws, he argues, that wines become haunting, revelatory, and capable of directing our attention to new places and ideas. Bonny Doon's first biodynamic vintages, grown in San Juan Bautista, will debut in two or three years.

**Carolyn de la Peña:** When and where did your fixation with wine begin?

**Randall Graham:** I grew up in Southern California, in West Los Angeles. When I was twenty years old I had the great fortune to accidentally wander into a wine shop two blocks from my parents' house. The first thing they asked me was, "Would you like to open a charge account?" And I said, "Absolutely, yes, thank you very much." My calculation was that I would never be able to afford to drink great wines on a regular basis and if I wanted to experience those kinds of wines pretty much all the time, I would have to learn how to make them myself.

**CDLP:** What do you think of California wines?

**RG:** In the New World and anywhere else where wine is studied as a science, what we study is how to control the process, and we're very much in the realm of "wines of effort," stylized wines. This has been the strength of the New World, our consistency, our reliability. We don't have clunker vintages; we don't have clunker wines. That's the upside. The downside, however, is that because everything we do is so controlled, we also don't have the radical, revelatory surprises. We seldom astonish ourselves.

**CDLP:** You sound like you're bored with California wines—were they ever astonishing?

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Randall Graham swirls the wine at Bonny Doon.

**RG:** I don't know if California wines were ever astonishing, but at one point they were certainly more soulful, more impressive, but perhaps in a quieter way. Right now the wine business is deformed by financial considerations, everything is so corporate; everything is business, everything has to work financially, so that there is an enormous self-consciousness about what one does and this leads to a great conservatism in winemaking style, real aversion to risk-taking. In the old days no one had the expectation of making tons of money in the wine business. You did it just because you loved it. Land was not crazy expensive, and if you didn't sell your wine one year you'd sell it the next. Winemakers would say back then, "If nobody buys the wine, fuck 'em; I'll drink it myself." Nobody says that anymore. Nobody dares do anything without talking to a consultant, and the consultants have consultants. There's really no room for mistakes or even for experimentation. I think that leads to a sort of homogeneity of product and not to real breathtaking originality.

I don't think you can make great wine and also do it as a business. I think it has to be a kind of calling, or a subsidized activity.

**CDLP:** What do you mean when you say that California wines have a "meaning deficit"?

**RG:** They don't come from a place; they're Stepford wines, if you will. They're technically perfect but there's nobody home, in the sense that they're not coming from somewhere discernible.

I think the more personally connected a winemaker is to his or her wine, the more interesting it is. I'm not the only person who's said this, but God save us from technically perfect wines. I do sincerely prefer slightly flawed wines. Not grossly flawed wines, but wines that are not quite perfect.

Most California wines you can like but not love. They're not what I would call haunting; they don't have this deep, infinitely changing, infinitely multifaceted aspect, which I think only comes from the intelligence of nature. If



everything is controlled, there's no room for nature to insert her qualities.

**CDLP:** Doesn't nature, in California, just want to give us bad wine? Why should we trust her?

**RG:** The paradox is that in California staying within the realm of the safe, staying within the realm of the controlled, generally gives you excellent results. So it's a little bit irrational to try to pursue more "natural" wines. As much as you esteem them—and I do—the path is fraught with danger because the supposition is that you're going to have the wit to discover an appropriate *terroir* and you're going to have the further wit to discover what are the appropriate grapes and root stocks and spacing and trellis system and irrigation strategy and vine orientation and that you're going to discover this all within a relatively short lifetime, which is dwindling away even as we speak. Are unadorned wines going to be greater? I don't know. I've just reached a point in my life where I don't have the same need to please people that I once had. But I do have to please myself absolutely.

**CDLP:** Is it possible to produce good California wine in a way that is ecologically sustainable?

**RG:** It'd be nice if there were a little more rainfall in the summer; that would really go a long way. As a biodynamic practitioner you really don't want to import anything from off the site if you can avoid it. Sometimes you have to bring in some specialized biodynamic preps that are just too hard or too tedious to make yourself. But you don't want to be importing fertilizers or soil amendments in any substantive way. If you're making any changes to the soil you want it to be done in this very gentle, gradual way, and you're really doing that through the compost. So your initial choice of a site is very important if you want it to be self-sustaining. And there aren't that many places in California where everything's pretty much balanced to start with.

**CDLP:** What do you mean by saying we need "revelatory" wines in California—and why do they have to be biodynamic?

**RG:** Well, we always need revelation—about all things. I don't think biodynamic practice will necessarily lead to the



production of wines expressive of *terroir*—everything else, from the selection of the site to farming practice, has to conduce to that. But it is a powerful methodology that explicitly addresses the question of the individuation or originality of a particular site. When I say “revelatory” wines, I’m talking about wines that will begin to change our vocabulary, the language that we use about quality in wine. I want the language to move in the direction of a discussion of the life force of the wine, the vitality of the wine, not simply in the current parlance: the wine’s voluptuousness or its hedonistic aspects. Rather, does the wine have the ability to age? Does the wine have the ability to change and evolve? Is it going to live for twenty or thirty years? And is the wine wholesome? This is a really dicey area, but wine should not only taste good, it should make you feel good. It should make you feel good while you’re tasting it, and it should make you feel good the next day after you’ve drunk it.

**CDLP:** Even if you can produce these new wines, the price tag will be well beyond what most typical consumers are used to paying now. Why will they buy Bonny Doon?

**RG:** Many wine consumers think wine comes out of a wine store and food comes out of a grocery store. When you visit the place where the wine is made or food is grown, you understand it in a different way. I think Napa Valley’s reputation kind of trivializes that. People think, “Oh, yeah, wine country, the place where they’ve got all those spas and restaurants, that’s where wine comes from.” I would love to see a consumer who comes out to look at my vineyard and says, “How come there aren’t any pipes out here for irrigation? And those vines—they look a little different from those other vines. They’re head-trained and they’re kind of close to the ground and they’re kind of small and they’re kind of scraggly. I wonder if that has any relation to how the wine tastes?” Just going into a cave and feeling the physical presence of a cave and how frigin’ cold it is and looking at how the wine is made—this makes an impression that you could never learn from a book or a magazine article. If I could educate people onsite as to what makes my wine different from 98 percent of the wines in California, that would go a long way toward

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their understanding why it might cost fifty or sixty bucks. Just simply tasting it I don't think is quite enough to get why it's distinctive.

Ultimately, you want the vinous equivalent of farmers' markets; you want to reach people who go to them and who also love wine. The problem is that normally these are two different populations. You've got people who buy organic because they're ideologically committed to organic produce and then you've got people who buy stuff just because they like the way it tastes. And these two have not yet merged. If you tell the average wine consumer that the wine is organic or biodynamic, they'll generally run top speed in the opposite direction. They don't want wines that are organic; they don't want wines that are biodynamic. That means funky. That means

weird. They want wines that are perfect, or at least wines that won't embarrass them when guests come to dinner.

**CDLP:** But didn't you help create this consumer aversion to biodynamic, slightly flawed and "revelatory" wines in the first place?

**RG:** I've always tried to make wines that were "pleasing," fruity, maybe not so obviously challenging. And maybe I've been more focused on the exterior of the package—the clever labels and marketing. I'm not exactly ashamed, but slightly chagrined by having been such a slick marketer, producing wines that were essentially commodity wines. They were confectionary wines. I'm not saying that they were better or worse than anything else in California, but I wish I hadn't done it for quite as long as I did. These were perfectly reasonable wines but there was nothing original about them, there was nothing natural about them, and there was nothing *necessary* about them. The world didn't need any of these wines. I truly think that original wines—wines that scratch the sense of place—make the world richer. I think they add to the ecological complexity of the world and are therefore worthwhile. It's like a new species, a new bird or butterfly. The world is better for it. **B**