

# Bonny Doon Vineyard



In the Platonic system of philosophy, the ideal form of government is the Philosopher-King. Two thousand years later, California has improved upon this — they have a Philosopher-Winemaker in the form of Randall Grahm, owner and self-styled “President-for-Life” of the [Bonny Doon Vineyard](#). Oz Clarke has best described Randall as “tall, a wind-break of long, wavy black hair framing a face which is a mixture of cherubic naughtiness and eagerness to please. He seems half errant, distracted Italian orchestra conductor and half an outsized Gene Wilder.” An aggressive promoter of California wine, Grahm has a “manic, punning lunacy, ... passionate advocacy ... and inspired foolery.” Time and again, Grahm contradicts standard marketing principles; he makes over thirty wines each with a radically different label. With this “brilliantly original self-publicist” at the helm, Bonny Doon is ideally positioned to take advantage of the new “post-chardonnay world.”

I first met Randall in 1990 at the 2300 Club in Richmond where importer Spencer Graham had gathered the best and the brightest of Virginia’s retail trade to introduce Bonny Doon Winery and its guru, Randall Grahm. We had all seen his famous picture on the cover of the Wine Spectator issue on the “Rhône Rangers” about the group of young Turks who were growing Rhône grapes. The picture with Randall dressed as the “Lone Ranger” complete with black mask, white outfit, a horse and half-bottles of his dessert Muscat stuffed in his holsters. We thought we were ready to meet the man behind the mask. We wandered through the many small rooms tasting the wines and then gathered to hear Randall tell about his wines and his philosophy. I vividly remember the scene: the hushed crowd jam-packed into the hot room intently focused on the towering six foot something, long-haired, worn leather bomber jacket-wearing winemaker speak about the first wine, the Bonny Doon Chardonnay La Reina.

We had all tasted the wine and were whispering among ourselves about its fabulous flavors and bold richness when he began: “This is my Chardonnay ... This is a great Chardonnay ... I hate Chardonnay, and look forward to the day when I can stop making it and concentrate on other lesser-known varieties.” We were all shocked back into a dead silence.

No wine figure of authority, in fact no one in the wine trade had ever spoken like this. We all realized that we had just witnessed a revolutionary act. What could be more American than hotdogs, apple pie and Chardonnay? The silence grew and the pressure built. Then from the back came a [tentative clap](#) and a slightly less tentative “all right!” Quickly the rest of the back row joined in and within seconds the room exploded into a bedlam of shouts, applause and cheers. I think most of us realized the enormous challenge Randall had thrown down and its revolutionary nature, but we were all ready to hear more. When the noise died down Randall explained his philosophy. The details are lost to history, but he spoke with conviction about his rebellion against the mind- and palate-numbing domination of the wine world by Cabernet and Chardonnay, or as he termed it the “Cabo- and Chardocentric Paradigm.” California had a Mediterranean climate, he testified, and should grow Mediterranean grapes: Rhône varieties, Italian varieties, Spanish varieties and so on. Comments he wrote several years later echo those stirring words:

*Like Columbus who sought a trade route to Asia, I set sail in 1979 for the Great American Pinot Noir, foundered on the shoals of astringency and finesselessness and ended up running aground in the utterly unexpected New World of Rhône & Italian varieties. If there is a tragic flaw at Bonny Doon, it is no doubt, excessive eclecticism.*

*We are experimenting with scores of meridional varieties in the hopes of discovering which grape varieties will marry well with the growing conditions that obtain in our Santa Cruz Mountain & Monterey vineyards. The salient and recurring winemaking themes of Bonny Doon Vineyard/California del Solo are:*

by Market Street Wineshop

- 1) *Having as much fun with the wine as the relevant governmental agencies will allow.*
- 2) *Producing wines and wine labels that will scintillate the sensibilities of the most jaded imbibers.*
- 3) *Retaining as much of the natural qualities of the grapes (especially fragrance) through careful handling and minimal cellar treatment. Limpidity for its own sake, is eschewed.*
- 4) *Paying particularly close attention to the chestnut that wine is produced in the vineyard.*

*We try to enact the appropriate cultural practices that will lead to the fullest expression of the character of the varietal. I consider myself a champion of the strange and the heterodox, of the ugly duckling grape varietals whose very existence is threatened by the dominant Cabo- and Chardo-centric paradigm.*

**Ca' del Solo:**

*Ca' del Solo is an imaginary kingdom located somewhere near the Soledad-Piemonte border whose inhabitants speak a grammatically unique dialect.*

*Ca' del Solo is an enological kingdom in exile, temporarily quartered at Bonny Doon Vineyard. It's inhabitants are continually going 'solo,' embarking upon projects that are sometimes risky, sometimes wrong-headed, but always according to their own lights. Ca' del Solo is a work in progress and in the coming years, one might expect a proliferation of eclectic Italian varietals from this domaine.*

[There actually is a vineyard of Italianate varietals planted in Soledad, located just behind the California Men's Correctional Facility.]

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