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Pacific Rim

Bonny Doon Vineyard founder Randall Graham's midlife crisis prompts an investment in Washington state

(05-18) 04:00 PDT Columbia Valley, Wash.—For years, Washington vintners fretted that another California big shot would invade their turf. Chalone Wine Group partnered with local growers in 1990 to create Canoe Ridge, now owned by Diageo. Rubicon Estate's Larry Stone, too, eyed a site for his Sirta winery, but the deal dissolved.

Others came from farther afield, including Piero Antinori, who paired his Tuscan sensibilities with the influence of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, the state's largest winery. Together they recently unveiled a \$6.5 million home for their joint project, Col Solare.

But here, amid 130 acres of Riesling vines on this wind-lashed bluff above the Columbia River, home to the Wallula Vineyard, lies evidence of another outsider's arrival. Could it be the nearby French-made copper vortex mixer used to craft biodynamic soil preparations by the vatful?

Because no one expected that the Californian interloper would be the psychedelia-wielding proprietor of Bonny Doon Vineyard, known for his bizarre blends and through-the-looking-glass labels.

Yet there it is: Randall Graham has come to town.

Graham's new endeavor, Pacific Rim Winemakers, is driven by a curious vision: to create a (nearly) all-Riesling winery that can satisfy Americans' thirst for this food-friendly grape. With U.S. sales of Riesling up more than 25 percent in the past year, according to the Nielsen Co., there's certainly potential.

This year, Pacific Rim expects to make 120,000 cases of Riesling and 6,000 of Chenin Blanc. Within five years, the company expects to produce 300,000 cases of Riesling a year. It will be dwarfed by Ste. Michelle, which makes 868,000 cases of Washington Riesling a year, but would become one of the state's largest wineries. If Graham has his way, a good portion of its grapes will be farmed biodynamically.

Biodynamic Riesling for the masses? It's so Randall Graham.

This, after all, is the guy who reveled in planting such obscurities as Fer Servadou and whose tasting notes read like a hybrid between Michael Broadbent and Allen Ginsburg. His latest endeavor was born out of the same soul-searching that prompted Graham last year to drastically slash the size of Bonny Doon and sell off two of his biggest assets. Yet it seems poised to become another outsized project—just the sort of thing he wanted to escape.

For one thing, that much wine requires grapes from many different vineyards, a puzzling decision for a guy who claims he



Randall Graham (right), Owner of Pacific Rim Winemakers, spars with General Manager Nicolas Quillé, in Jim Willard's vineyard near Prosser, Wash.

downsized so he could circle back to a zealous devotion to terroir.

"It may be a little schizophrenic," Graham says, "but there you have it."

The cornerstone of this effort is a new \$5.7 million winery in East Richland, just east of Washington's Red Mountain appellation, built and financed by Bill and Andy Den Hoed, owners of the Wallula Vineyard and source for almost half of Pacific Rim's grapes. The 27,500-square-foot winery, publicly unveiled in April, will be open in time for the 2007 harvest. Surrounded by irrigation pivots, it's just down from Col Solare's magisterial winery near the top of Red Mountain, at the end of Antinori Road. Thus far, there is no Graham Street.

If Pacific Rim Riesling sounds familiar, that's because it was a long-standing Bonny Doon brand launched in 1992, made largely with fruit from Washington state, though about 20 percent German Riesling is blended into the American Dry Riesling. Bonny Doon had prior ties with several Washington winegrowers. But the wine, made in King City (Monterey County), and bottled at Bonny Doon's Santa Cruz facility, had no real geographic identity.

Then in 2003, Graham ran into a Frenchman named Nicolas Quillé at a Seattle tasting for the Rhone Rangers group that Graham helped to found. Quillé, a winemaker on track to get an MBA from the University of Washington, was working at the time for Hogue Cellars, a large Yakima Valley winery. Graham, ever the Francophile, took a shine to Quillé, but the Lyon native didn't want another winemaking job; he



Three bottles await drinking at the Pacific Rim groundbreaking ceremony last month. From left, Sweet Riesling, Chenin Blanc and Dry Riesling.

was intent on finding a wine company to run. Six months later, Graham called.

"He didn't know how to get from A to B," says Quillé, 34, who was hired as Bonny Doon's general manager. "And B was to focus on a smaller Bonny Doon, with all estate vineyards."

As Quillé puts it, Graham, 54, had joined a growing posse of Baby Boomer winemakers "trying to find meaning in their lives."

In Graham's case, the golden tourniquet was Bonny Doon, which had grown from its quirky early days as the home of Graham's Rhone-style Le Cigare Volant blend to a 425,000-case heavyweight. The popular Big House series of wines, and the equally popular Cardinal Zin—with its Ralph Steadman label that once was banned in Ohio—accounted for over half of it. What began as side projects had become the propeller that drove the S.S. Bonny Doon. "It got to such a point that I really didn't like it very much anymore," Graham says.

At the same time, Graham had come to realize two things. First, he had become an enthusiastic convert to biodynamics, the near-religious devotion to practices that require vineyards to be farmed in harmony with their natural surroundings. Graham wanted Bonny Doon back

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in control of all its vineyards, and he wanted to farm his land biodynamically. With so many growers supplying grapes, those goals were virtually impossible.

Second, Graham's more popular efforts had alienated him from his love of the notion of terroir—wines that spoke of their unique sense of place. Despite his belief in winemaking technologies like micro-oxygenation, he found himself increasingly distanced from some of wine's simpler charms.

"It just occurred to me that I had to do something very radical," Graham says. "But what do you do? Do I sell the company? Would anyone want to buy Bonny Doon?"

Yes. And no. While Bonny Doon's brands were strong, Graham's outré personality was the core of its identity. Bonny Doon minus Randall Graham was just another California winery with ho-hum wine.

So Graham found a third option: Shed the brands that held him back. In July 2006, he sold Big House and Cardinal Zin to San Francisco's the Wine Group LLC for an undisclosed amount. Of some 100 employees at Bonny Doon prior to the sale, Quillé says about 40 were let go. The staff is now less than half its former size.

This year, Bonny Doon will produce 35,000 bottles. In wine terms, it has shrunk by more than 90 percent. The Ca' del Solo wines (which once included Big House) have always been an outlet for Graham's esoteric wine ideas. He has kept Sangiovese, and this year added an estate Albarino and Muscat. Familiar pen-and-ink labels were replaced by kaleidoscopic images of the wine's "sensitive crystallizations" that fall visually somewhere between a balloon and a prophylactic.

As for Graham's biodynamic dreams, he estimates 65 percent of the 2006 harvest was farmed using biodynamic methods. Just over two months ago, Bonny Doon's 125-acre Ca' del Solo Vineyard in Soledad (Monterey County) was certified biodynamic. He intends to implement biodynamic—or at least organic—practices at every vineyard owned or controlled by Bonny Doon.

"For me," Graham says, "biodynamics is the road to terroir."

Pacific Rim languished amid the great Bonny Doon shrinkage. Graham had tried to sell the brand, but couldn't get his asking price. So with the money from the Big House sale burning a hole in his pocket, Graham decided to spin it off.

Wineries typically take years to launch, but the first talk of a Pacific Rim breakaway began just 14 months ago. Only last December did Quillé and five other Bonny Doon staffers move up to offices in Portland, Ore., to create this new Riesling empire. The company officially broke free from Bonny Doon on April 1.

As for grapes, Quillé was keen on the Yakima Valley, where much of Graham's Riesling had been sourced. It can be a difficult place to ripen red wine grapes, thanks to a shorter growing season and later budbreak for vines. But those same qualities can help a cool-climate white grape like Riesling, especially if you want less alcohol and leaner fruit flavors. Since Pacific Rim was conceived to pair with more delicate foods, even sushi, that taste profile is essential. Quillé picks his Riesling block at Wallula up to



Nicolas Quillé (center), General Manager of Pacific Rim Winemakers, goes over plans with Owner Randall Graham (second from left) at the groundbreaking ceremony for the winery.

three weeks before nearby vines consigned to another winery.

If anyone could hawk Riesling, it would be Graham. In 1999, he coauthored a "Riesling Manifesto" with Alsatian vintner André Ostertag and Johannes Selbach of Germany's Mosel Valley, who now supplies the German component of the Pacific Rim Dry Riesling, which is used for its edgier citrus flavors and low alcohol levels. Graham wrote in his trademark style: "Thus Riesling asylum was born, out of a need for independence, out of mistrust for the hegemony of the cabochard-centric paradigm."

At times it can be tough to reconcile Graham's Doon 2.0 vision with Pacific Rim. Both he and Quillé speak of terroir, but how do you express place when your wine comes from 500-plus acres on nine or more sites? Or when you add in a shot of German wine? ("I'm a little tortured about it," Quillé says.) For that matter, how does a 300,000 case winery fit in with Graham's vision of thinking small?

When pressed, both Graham and Quillé acknowledge creative tensions, and it's here that glimmers appear of the shrewdness behind Graham's wild-eyed proselytism. "It's not marketed the way I would market it. It's not sold the way I would sell it, it's not made the way I would make it. I'm not the winemaker," Graham says. "I'm sort of just the owner and cheerleader."

Still, Pacific Rim has the potential to reshape the Riesling market. Graham has a powerful following and an uncanny knack for projecting a small-winery image even when he's moving big numbers.

"We're at a point now where we think we've mastered Riesling in Washington," says Ted Baseler, Ste. Michelle's president and CEO. "Having Randall Graham come here is very complimentary to what we're doing."

Pacific Rim's suggested retail price of \$10.99 per bottle is appealing as a weeknight option. P.F. Chang's is selling the dry Riesling by the glass. Washington vintners primarily seem interested in whether he'll promote the region. "If it says Washington state on the label, it all helps," says Tom Hedges of Hedges Family Estate.

As for Graham's biodynamic blitz, his Washington growers face a soft sell. On the one hand, there is Jim Willard of Willard Family Vineyards outside Prosser in the central Yakima

Valley, whose first Riesling vines went into the ground in 1980. An old-time farmer who sells to wineries like Seven Hills and L'Ecole No. 41, Willard doesn't strike you as a Randall Graham guy. ("The first time I met him he had a 'Boycott France' sticker on his truck," Quillé says.) But even Willard was coaxed to California for a biodynamics seminar. "It sort of changed my way of looking at vineyard management," he says.

On the other hand, consider Andy and Bill Den Hoed. Brothers who look like they might be toned-down Grateful Dead members (albeit in the Bob Weir mode), they own large swaths of vineyard land on both ends of the Yakima Valley, growing grapes to spec for such wineries as Ste. Michelle and Leonetti Cellar. Their Wallula Vineyard, 1,650 acres in the Horse Heaven Hills appellation, stretches along 4 miles of riverfront high above the river, with the nation's third-largest wind turbine farm on a nearby ridgeline. The Riesling block will ultimately provide up to 30 percent of Pacific Rim's total production. Quillé wants to make a single-vineyard Riesling from it, along with a sparkling Riesling.

The Den Hoeds eagerly signed on when Graham and Quillé showed up with a long list of requests, from biodynamic practices to a special method of buried irrigation that draws roots down into the silty loam soil and outward from the vine rows, allowing them to reduce their water use over time.

The Den Hoeds' Riesling plot, planted on what had been virgin land, is biodynamics on a large scale. They installed a unique trellising system that spreads vine canopies (to reduce sun exposure and help achieve those sharper fruit flavors) but can be folded up to provide a mechanical harvester easy access to underhanging fruit.

Ah yes, the harvester. For this project, the Den Hoeds bought a \$250,000 machine that not only harvests but can apply biodynamic preparations to six rows at a time. Such a machine in the vineyard might leave some biodynamic advocates aghast—and Graham won't even use mechanical harvesting for the new Bonny Doon vineyards. It is one sign that biodynamics' future could be very different than the pastoral view of the past.

"This," notes Bill Den Hoed, "is Nicolas' wild scheme here."

And though Pacific Rim is being billed as an all-Riesling winery, Graham has grander plans in the distance. Not far from the Den Hoeds' Riesling plantings lie fledgling vines of Gamay Noir, the red grape of Beaujolais. Other space is set aside for Gruner Veltliner, the aromatic Austrian white grape. Neither has more than a token presence in America, but with Graham on the case, don't rule out the possibility of either one going mainstream.

Graham sees it all fitting into his vision—affordable, food-friendly wines beyond the usual. "We're going to have fun with these grapes," he says. "Whether they're going to be great, who knows? But we're going to have fun."

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Photos by Ron Wurzer, special to the Chronicle.