

Randall Grahm's Quest for 'Wines of Place' Creates a New Frontier for California

BY [STACY BRISCOE](#)



"WE'RE REALLY TRYING TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE MICROBIOLOGY OF THE SOIL," SAYS RANDALL GRAHM / PHOTO COURTESY OF RANDALL GRAHM

Create wines of place. That's the goal [Randall Grahm](#) set for himself in 2011, when he purchased his 280-acre [Popelouchum](#) estate in San Juan Bautista, [California](#). He says he wanted to make wines that express true distinction and originality, that act as "terroir amplifiers."

The 80 planted acres are home to "conventional varieties"—[Pinot Noir](#), [Grenache Blanc](#) and Gris.

"But we're trying to grow them in an old fashion, simpler way," says Grahm. "The use of dry farming, biochar, limited yields, no till. We're really trying to pay attention to the microbiology of the soil—all those things create an emphasis on the sense of place, the distinctiveness of the site."

Further to this effort of site distinction, Grahm is dabbling with what he calls “varietal auto-tuning.”

“I made up the term, but the idea is to start with a grape that does well on the site and make it more congruent to the site.” This, he says, is what sparked his interest in and experimentation with self crossings, using vines of the same variety to create entirely new ones.

Enter Sérine. It’s a clone of Syrah, which Grahm argues is the most delicious grape variety in existence.

“For that reason, it has immense potential for commercial success in California,” he says. “Its genius has to do with its spiciness, abundance of fruit, relatively soft tannins and friendliness to food.”

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But Syrah is not native to California.

“It was planted in Côte Rôtie, in Hermitage. It’s very well suited to the Northern Rhône. If you want to find a variant of it suited to [your specific site], you probably want to create some differences and observe which are better.”

This project, Grahm says, is no different than how the great grapes from well-known wine regions gained their superior status. He makes a reference to the monks of Burgundy who devoted their lives to Pinot Noir.

“They spent a lot of time and attention...so that over many centuries, Pinot Noir became better suited to the site.” Grahm has planted around 800 Sérine vines at Popelouchum. Just two years old, they’re only now starting to bear fruit, each showcasing a unique varietal characteristic innate to the Sérine grape.

“When I first started the idea of ‘varietal auto-tuning,’ the thought was to find the best, most interesting Syrah/Sérine-ish plant that will grow in San Juan Bautista.

I’m still looking for that,” says Grahm. “But here’s my most recent advance: There is a unique opportunity to ‘deconstruct’ the Sérine grape into discrete components [biotypes] and retain those distinctive components as part of an assemblage. Maybe it’s

not just one particular grape that is interesting. Most likely, it's a suite of grapes that will produce the most interesting wine."

In other words, instead of trying to find the "best" Sérine crossing, Graham is now looking for the most interesting combination of grapes. He's seeking to produce wines of "utter distinction, originality and far more complexity than something obtained from a single selection."

Graham believes this discovery—if it works—may represent a new approach to grape growing and winemaking. It could be a model for the future of California's wine industry.

"If you can get people to become more sensitive to the value of place, the value of wines of place, I think you're ultimately going to be making products that are more sustainable for the future," he says. "The more like a commodity [your vineyard is], the less sustainable it is. The more individuated, distinctive and original it is, the greater the likelihood of sustainability and the ability to use land more thoughtfully and successfully."



BONNY DOON VINEYARD FOUNDER, RANDALL GRAHM (L), PREPARES PINOT NOIR GRAPES FOR PLANTING ALONG WITH VINEYARD EMPLOYEE LINDSEY SONU (R) / PHOTO BY MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ

'Thuse Qs

What's the first wine you remember tasting?

Manischewitz Concord wine at a family seder at age seven or eight or nine.

What is your most memorable drinking experience?

'49 De Vogue Musigny out of a magnum.

If you could only bring one grape to a desert island, which grape would it be?

How can you grow Riesling on a desert island?

It's pizza night—what wine are you drinking?

A pesto pizza with Rossese would be the perfect combination.



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No Longer a Secret, Red Mountain Earns Its Place In the Spotlight

BY [SEAN P. SULLIVAN](#)