

# A VINTNER'S QUEST TO CREATE A TRULY AMERICAN WINE

*Randall Grahm's iconoclastic obsession will involve breeding new varieties from scratch and growing them where grapes have never been grown before.*

By Adam Gopnik

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Many students have been driven to drink by the effort of understanding Martin Heidegger's "Being and Time." Only one, perhaps, has been driven to wine, exclusively and for life, and that is the inimitable California vintner, punster, screw-top evangelist, and all-around Don Quixote of the vineyards, Randall Grahm. In the nineteen-seventies, when he was a philosophy major at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and struggling with a senior thesis on the concept of Dasein, the most obscure idea in Heidegger's obscure classic, he happened to wander into a wine store in Beverly Hills called the Wine Merchant. It was a time when the great crus of France were relatively cheap, and the owner, Dennis Overstreet, soon to be his employer, was generous. "There was a kind of Bordeaux scandal at the time, and he had taken some really crappy stuff off the exporters' hands in exchange for several cases of Musigny," Grahm explains. As he and Overstreet shared a bottle of the 1971 Comte Georges de Vogüé Musigny, Vieilles Vignes, the mystery of Dasein was replaced by the mystery of Musigny: how, Grahm wondered, had something so haunting and complicated been produced by growing grapes, juicing them, and then letting them grow old in bottles?

Within a short time, Grahm had enrolled at the University of California at Davis, the M.I.T. of American fermentation, where winemaking had become an object of academic research. There, he began an obsession with creating an American wine that has some of the qualities of great red Burgundy—or even those of the great wines of France's Rhône Valley. As he points out, several figures in the making of California

wine culture were also renegade philosophy students, including Paul Draper, the recently retired head winemaker of Ridge Vineyards and one of the few whom Graham unstintingly admires. He offers a simple reason for the connection between philosophers and wine: “Wine is a mystery that holds the promise of an explanation.”

His improbable quest has led him to become a pioneer of Rhône Valley varietals in Northern California; an apostle of the screw cap as the one right “closer” for good wine; and, for a while, a very successful beverage businessman (at one point, largely on the strength of his popular wine Big House, he was selling four hundred and fifty thousand cases a year). Next came a semi-orderly downsizing of his wine label, Bonny Doon, prompted by fears of its being corrupted by too much commercialism. Most recently, he has decided to take possession of four hundred acres of land near the little mission town of San Juan Bautista—it’s the place where Hitchcock’s “Vertigo” reaches its climax, though the tower from which Kim Novak falls was added to the mission by the film’s art-department team. Thirty or so miles from Santa Cruz, on a hillside where nothing but grass and weeds has ever grown, Graham is going to try to make an American wine that is an entirely original expression of its terroir, of the land on which it’s raised and the place from which it came.

The effort at the new vineyard, called Popelouchum, involves a three-pronged assault. First, Graham intends to plant and test a series of uncelebrated grapes that have languished in the shadows of European viticulture. Next, he will “auto-tune” some familiar European grapes by breeding them incestuously and then testing for slight improvements in each successive generation. Finally, he hopes to produce an entirely new American varietal by growing and crossing unlikely pairs of grapes from seed—which is a bit like an ambitious Yankees general manager trying to raise starting shortstops from embryos. “There may not be one great American grape,” Graham says, philosophically. “It may be the intermingling of a thousand grapes that becomes *the* great grape.”

The Don Quixote comparison is self-imposed—Graham once wrote a ten-thousand-word poem with himself in the role of a character called Don Quijones—and so, given the scale of this year’s windmills, any small sign of reassurance raises his spirits. “I had a geomancer out to Popelouchum,” he recalled not long ago, from the driver’s seat of his 1972 Citroën, “and he said that we must orient the entrance of the site in only one

direction.” Geomancy is an ancient means of divination involving throwing soil and rocks and interpreting their omens; Grahm, in the Northern California way, is an agreeable mixture of tough-minded agricultural science and what he calls “Santa Cruz woo-woo.” He went on, “So, the geomancer goes like this, definitively: ‘Northwest! That’s the way in which prosperity lies! I’m sure that he had no *idea* that he was pointing directly at Cupertino!’” Cupertino is the site of Apple’s headquarters, just around the bend.

“And then we had the Bourguignons out to the vineyard!” Claude and Lydia Bourguignon are a legendary and aptly named French surveying couple who evaluate sites for wine growing. “They identified five distinct terroirs within the property,” Grahm said. “And the really exciting thing is the extravagance of limestone—there’s limestone *everywhere*.” Limestone, he explained, is typical of the greatest vineyards, which tend to be stony rather than loamy, stress making finer grapes. “Rocks are always good, but I think it’s the porousness of limestone that explains its power,” he added. “It breathes. Of course, on the other side, there are so many forbidding negatives! There’s the fault line—we’re *right* on the San Andreas fault line. No one knows just how that will change things. And there’s the rats! We have these giant mutant vineyard rats that basically ate the entire first crop. We can’t poison them, of course.” The new vineyard is meant to be not only organic, without pesticides of any sort, but also “dry farmed,” without irrigation. “So I’m renting some Jack Russell terriers who are *demon* ratters.”

Grahm was driving on the Pacific Coast Highway, with his fourteen-year-old daughter in the back seat. He has the long face, ponytail, and ironic, shrugging manner of a surviving comedian of the nineteen-seventies, a sort of George Carlin fed on red wine rather than on coke and whiskey. He has many manners of melancholy. He can look distressed even when he is drinking wine—*especially* when he is drinking wine, including his own. There is an ever-hopeful first swirl and sniff, and a half glimpse of pleasure as he begins to drink; then he becomes pained, and eventually his expression conveys something close to the resigned despair of a Shakespeare hero in the fifth act of his tragedy. As he once explained to someone puzzled by his seeming distress at drinking a perfectly nice wine, “I don’t *want* another nice wine. I want a wine that’s like the old Saint-Émilion Cheval Blanc, a wine that when you drink it you just want to inject it directly into your veins!”

He is a passionate Francophile—his daughter is named Amelie—and the '72 Citroën, perhaps the most curvaceously beautiful family car ever made, needed an undue amount of fidgeting and tending. “The car is part of my shtick,” Graham said with a laugh. He is one of those people—more often found in the upper reaches of show business—who are sincerely shrewd, or, better, shrewdly sincere. His passion and erudition are real, but he is aware that being passionate and erudite is, in the wine world, a good look, a useful kind of product differentiation.

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“I’m Santa Cruz crazy,” he explained. “The thing is, I’m *normative* here. It’s been a retreat for crazy winemakers as long as there’s been wine. It’s our tradition. It’s a less stressful place than most of the rest of the winemaking areas. It’s not Napa.” He began to enumerate Santa Cruz eccentrics: “There was Martin Ray, the first California winemaker to catch the Burgundian bug to the point of obsession. He made very expensive wines that alternated between profoundly great and undrinkable. He was sort of the Hunter S. Thompson of the Santa Cruz Mountains. And then Dan Wheeler. I

got the idea from him to age wine *en bonbonne*—in big glass flasks instead of oak barrels. “Angry, irascible individuals. Not company men.”

It is Randall Grahm’s view, and not his alone, that California winemaking has become altogether too corporate. “We’re sort of at the last-of-the-gunslingers stage,” he said, referring to the recent sale of Josh Jensen’s Calera Vineyard to a conglomerate. The revolution begun by the winemakers and the vineyard scientists of Davis back in the nineteen-sixties and seventies has in some ways paid off beyond anyone’s ambitions. More than a billion and a half dollars’ worth of American wine, almost all of it Californian, is now exported, most of it to the European Union, which had once seemed to have plenty of wine of its own. But the dream of making a great wine culture, as opposed to a thriving beverage industry, seems to recede more with each year. Most of the wine that’s sold is monotone, and the wine that claims not to be monotone is, Grahm believes, pretty monotone, too, made in the style of the one-dimensional “fruit bomb” wines that he associates with the reign of the wine critic Robert Parker.

Driving through the mountains, he occasionally jerked his head toward a vineyard, or referred to one elsewhere, and said, “They grow chocolate and vanilla there.” By “chocolate” he means Cabernet Sauvignon, and by “vanilla” he means Chardonnay. These are by far the most common varieties in California viticulture; the words suggest his opinion of the flavor of most of the wines.

**A**ccording to the archeological evidence—flasks and stoppers and sealants—the earliest wine production occurred in what is now Armenia, with the first vintage sometime around 4000 B.C. One of the few things that can be said with any confidence about it is that some ancient Armenian pronounced, shortly after the second vintage was produced, that the previous vintage was better. Arguments about vintages and varieties are as old as wine.

“Wine has always been a ritual as much as a recreational object,” Paul Draper, the Nestor of California wine, said recently. “Something that you talk about and write poems about. I feel the same way Randall does about the mystery of wine. I would even extend it to my interest in myth.” After his retirement from Ridge Vineyards, Draper and his wife went on a Jungian retreat in Ireland. “I’m always carried back to why wine was seen as magic or divine from the beginning. I suspect it’s because it is the most

familiar act of transformation. And it is one of the very few remaining rituals that many of us have. It makes the meal into a ritual that it otherwise would not be.”

Winemaking in California, unsurprisingly, began in a religious context. “Mission” grapes, grown by Spanish monks, were the first kind made into wine. (“They make horrible wine, unfortunately,” Grahm says.) The Zinfandel grape, which came to California as a variant of the Primitivo grape of southern Italy—though the shared precursor seems to have originated in Croatia—has been cultivated here for more than a century, and has a right to be taken as California’s native grape. But, in Grahm’s view, “it’s a holiday wine. Cranberry-sauce wine. It makes a rich wine, but never a complicated one.”

Grahm sometimes talks about the mission of “American” wine, but California is his true terroir. He has lived his entire life there, growing up in Los Angeles, although he showed few signs of succumbing to the madness of wine before his fateful trip to the Beverly Hills wine store. “We had Manischewitz, and that was about it,” his mother, Ruth, recalls. “My childhood was very Glass family,” Grahm says, using the term, correctly, to mean not a coven of intellectuals but a show-biz family that encouraged spiritual eccentricity. Ruth Grahm spent most of her life as a lyricist. Working with her composer father, Lou Herscher, she wrote, among other songs, “Mama Never Said a Word About Love,” “Fifty Games of Solitaire,” “Elmer the Knock-Kneed Cowboy,” and “Baby, I’m the Greatest.” “When he came home and told us that he wanted to become a winemaker—well, as far as I was concerned he could do anything he wanted, but my husband was livid,” Ruth says. “He wanted him to be a doctor, and he would have taken a professor.”

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After getting his degree, and with the eventual help of his wary father, Grahm bought some land in the town of Bonny Doon, in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The land still gives his wine its name, though he long ago surrendered the original vineyard after a series of insect infestations destroyed all the grapes. (“We got wiped out by the blue-

green sharpshooter and we were recovering, and then, two years later, they discovered *another* variant of sharpshooter called the glassy-winged sharpshooter, and the glassy-winged fed even more voraciously and flew ten times further, and I'm thinking to myself, We got wiped out by the wimpy vector? And now there's a super vector. We're *so* screwed.") Wine grapes are as sensitive to assaults as authors: in addition to sharpshooters, the tiny phylloxera louse, whose unintentional import from the New World nearly ended wine production in France a century and a half ago, is still rampant in California. (Most wine grapes in France now are grafted onto foreign rootstock, from native American plants that can resist phylloxera.)

"I was young and looking for property, and because the temperatures were cool, I thought it would work," he said. He planted several hectares of Pinot Noir, the great red grape of Burgundy, and waited for the results. He lived, mostly alone, with his two cats, Franny and Zooey. The results were crushingly disappointing. "What we were making was nothing like Burgundy. It was palatable at best and insipid at worst and had no sense of complexity or mystery or authenticity."

An article of faith for Grahm is that Pinot Noir just can't be grown in California. This opinion is, to put it mildly, far from universal. California Pinot includes a few cult wines that sell for significant sums to collectors who otherwise focus on high-end French wines. When such successes are mentioned, Grahm makes the long-suffering polite face of a Heideggerian being told that there's a really good philosophy of life in "Tuesdays with Morrie." "You can make a *vin d'effort*," he explains. "You can, with huge effort, make a Pinot Noir that has some of the characteristics of a Burgundy. But it's, like—well, you know the Borges story about the second author who comes along and copies 'Don Quixote' word for word? So the book, when it's done, it's much more effortful—and much less good."

Having been devastated by his first attempt to make a California Burgundy, Grahm essentially dug up the lawn and replanted instead the dark and meaty grapes of the Rhône Valley. He was not the first winemaker to plant Syrah, Grenache, Roussanne, and Cinsault, but he was, perhaps, the first to do it with a fully self-conscious intention of making a blend that would imitate the great wines of the Rhône: in particular, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, from the South. In 1984, he began to bottle a Rhône blend that remains his signature wine, the Cigare Volant, or flying cigar, which is what the French

call a flying saucer. The conceit derived from a joke bylaw that actually got passed in southern France, at the time of the U.F.O. scares of the fifties, forbidding any alien to land in a vineyard. This produced the name, the label (a photo collage using a nineteenth-century print and an image of a tractor beam emanating from a flying saucer above the vineyard), and the Bonny Doon signature graphic, of an oblong-headed alien with huge, sinister teardrop eyes, which is still on the cap of every Cigare-related wine that Bonny Doon bottles.

Even Graham skeptics, who are many, agree that the Cigare Volant was a breakthrough in California wine: complicated, many-sided, it changed its mood and character markedly from year to year, like a great European wine. (*Food & Wine* once listed it as among the “40 Wines That Changed the Way We Drink.”) Graham admits that it’s a good wine, though, he complains, “it always has personality, but it doesn’t yet have *identity*.” It was with Cigare Volant, too, that Graham began his practice of making labels designed by well-known illustrators, bearing names and legends that involve elaborate literary puns. “I loved the look of old wine labels, all the heterogeneous typography, different fonts crowded together, and wanted to play with them,” he says. One of his favorites is the label for his Grenache blend, Clos de Gilroy (the name is a play on the French word “*clos*,” meaning “enclosed vineyard,” with the vineyard in question being close to Gilroy, a town outside Santa Cruz), which features a portrait of Proust. The label has a bilingual punning motto, “*Le gil des rois, le roi des gils*,” a parody of the motto on Châteauneuf labels (“*Le vin des rois, le roi des vins*”—“The wine of kings, the king of wines”). Perhaps one in a hundred wine drinkers got all this, but the other ninety-nine noticed the label in the wine store.

The nineteen-eighties were a time of extravagant acceptance and sudden growth. Graham appeared on the cover of *Wine Spectator*, standing beside a white horse, with the legend “The Rhône Ranger.” It was also the period when he began to think of replacing traditional corks with more plebeian screw caps, on the ground that, however much fun the cork ritual might be, about five to ten per cent of all wine bottles would always become “corked”—spoiled by “cork taint”—and rendered undrinkable. Screw caps present a smaller problem of “reduction” of the wine in the bottle, which Graham thinks is easily resolved simply by decanting. In typical fashion, he publicized this cause, in 2002, with a mock funeral for the cork at Grand Central Terminal, in New



York, climaxing with a dinner of all-black dishes inspired by the decadent French fantasist J. K. Huysmans.

Even though the sharpshooters had wiped out the original vineyard, Grahm used his new fame to begin making wine of fantastically varied kinds, almost all from purchased grapes. The wine-world term “purchased grapes” is somewhat misleading.

“Commissioned grapes” comes much closer to defining the practice, which involves often torturous negotiations between the winemaker and the farmer about what to grow, how to grow it, and when to pick it. “You plead that they keep the yields under control, you plead with them not to overirrigate,” Grahm says. “It’s never perfect, like any relationship. This guy’s got a great attitude and he’s got a crappy vineyard; great vineyard, crappy attitude. Invariably.” In addition to the Rhône-type blends, he began to make and give punning names and labels to straight Syrahs, sweet wines, rosés (his Vin Gris de Cigare is probably his single most successful bottling), various sparkling ciders, champagne-style blends, and even a good Merlot called, in honor of the famous rant in the movie “Sideways,” “I Am Not Drinking Any \$%&\*#! Merlot.”

The eighties were also when Grahm had his first encounter with the nemesis of his story, the formidable wine taster and critic Robert Parker. At first, Parker, who had become a critical dictator along the lines of Clement Greenberg in the mid-century New York art world, was very much pro-Grahm. They shared an affection for the Rhône Valley, which had become Parker’s promised land of winemaking, and Grahm’s effort to make a California kind of Rhône wine brought them into concert.

Later, in the nineties, Parker, like Clement Greenberg turning on the older Jackson Pollock, decided that Grahm’s wine, what with all the punning labels and that new line of popular wine, Big House, had succumbed to the gods of commerce and advertising. He wrote a series of put-downs in his annual wine buyer’s guide. This was bad for the Bonny Doon business, and was also extremely offensive to Grahm, who thought of himself as the true obsessive, surrounded by businessmen, and saw his quirky (and expensive to produce) labels as a tribute to art rather than as a bid for Mammon.

Grahm brooded on the insult for years. Eventually, in 2003, he responded with what he now agrees was “the single biggest mistake of a life that has known many fine vintages of big mistakes.” He wrote and published a leaflet called *The National Vinqurer*, mimicking the typeface and voice of the *National Enquirer*. There, among puns and

jokes (“BRUCE & DEMI-SEC MARRIAGE ON THE ROPES”), was a parody article headlined “NOTED WINE CRITIC EXPLODES,” detailing the supposed death of Parker while overeating at a bistro in the Rhône Valley. The accompanying obituary mocked Parker’s overuse of the words “hedonistic” and “sexy” to describe the big, fruity wines that he had helped promote. “However, it would be accurate to report that there were literally gobs of fruit as well as gobs of poor Robert just about everywhere,” one onlooker is supposed to have reported of the explosion—“gobs of fruit” being another Parker unit of praise.

Mock a man’s appearance and he can forgive you; mock his adjectives and he is an enemy for life. Grahm’s relationship with Parker never really recovered. One Parker guide said, glacially, that Bonny Doon’s first Cigare Volant, in 1984, remained its best. Although Grahm doesn’t entirely disagree—“I had no idea what I was doing then, so I didn’t do it all wrong”—it was still wounding.

Having broken with Parker, Grahm felt free to be more openly critical of his wine standards, which involve numerical grades and favor “fruit bombs”—big, jammy, rich wines—over the more complicated and, on first taste, astringent wines that Grahm considers the main line of vinous greatness. “The one thing I won’t forgive Parker for is being a moral scold for perceived concentration,” he says. “If your wines are not concentrated enough, you’re morally deficient. This drives me shit-fucking mental. It’s ridiculous. It’s like evaluating music based on how loud it’s played.”

One recent morning, Grahm got in his Citroën and drove out to look at the Popelouchum property. Northern Californians are so habituated to the beauty of their environment that they can miss what they have, seeing only the crowded roads and the rising real-estate prices and the forest fires, in the same way that New Yorkers get so consumed with delays on the No. 6 line that they stop looking at the spire of the Chrysler Building. But an outsider’s breath is taken away by the beauty of the landscape unspooling around San Juan Bautista. It has all the elements that most people are said instinctively to associate with an idea of Eden: gently rolling hills stepping away toward a distant, shimmering ridge of blue-gray mountains; in the near distance, a valley of cultivated plains overhung with a flotation of white cumulus clouds, each distinct and ice-cream shapely, and all together creating a soft-edged patchwork

of beaming light and peaceful shadow below. In the hills, wildflowers grow in abundance.

“Furmint, Rossese, Ruché, all of these obscure grapes, we have them all planted already,” Grahm said, showing off the fields, where the only signs of planting were the crossed wooden sticks on which the vines would grow. “Furmint is the great sweet wine grape of Hungary, and we think that we have a spot where the geology looks perfect for it. We’re growing these grapes in a slightly old-fashioned way. We’re dry-farming them—we’re spacing them farther apart, interplanted with fruit trees and flowering shrubs—and the economics are challenging. But I think not impossible.”

As for his second project, “varietal auto-tuning,” he explained, “We started doing this with Grenache, and a number of professional colleagues told me it was a really bad idea, and about a year later, they’re saying, ‘You know, I’ve changed my mind. It’s maybe a good idea.’ It turns out that grapes are heterozygous. The seeds’ genetic information recombines, so that even if it’s Grenache crossed with itself it’s not the same Grenache anymore. Some of the offspring are inferior, or they’re sterile, but a small percentage actually have more interesting character than the parents. So we were doing that with Grenache—until the rats just decimated us.”

But the most ambitious, and quixotic, of his projects is breeding, the attempt to create new varieties by crossing existing ones and planting the seeds that result. Most wine grapes are grown from “clonal types”—exact genetic copies of successful vines, with cuttings taken from the precisely tuned familiar varieties. “Cross with seeds, though, and you often get far more diversity, which is how the original good varieties occurred,” Andy Walker, the resident genius of wine genetics at Davis, and Grahm’s adviser at Popelouchum, explains. “Pinot Noir, for instance, is a very jumpy grape. To this day, if you plant it in a vineyard you’ll get some Pinot Gris and some Pinot Blanc as well. The reason Pinot Noir is so variable in the bottle is that it’s a variable grape! We’re unfortunately stuck in the idea that the ancient great varieties are sacrosanct. But it turns out that all the ancient ones aren’t ancient. Cabernet Sauvignon is a relatively recent cross of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc. Chardonnay is Pinot Noir and Gouais Blanc. The monks may have started doing that a thousand years ago. We’re going to do it again, because now we need more variation and diversity—for making wines of place, as Randall says, but, above all, for climate change. A hot-weather Pinot

Noir clone—that’s not going to happen. But we could find two varieties and crossbreed for heat.”

A practical concern with climate change helps drive the Popelouchum project. “We harvest now throughout Northern California three to four weeks earlier than we ever used to,” Grahm said grimly. “It’s everywhere. Burgundy may be fucked. The northern Rhône Valley is partly fucked, though many of the great vineyards face away from the sun. The southern Rhône is *completely* fucked.” New varietals that can still produce warm-climate wines that are complex and not too alcoholic may happen only with new kinds of grapes. Grahm, climbing the highest hill in his new vineyard, one still covered with yellow wildflowers, with a surprisingly cool mountaintop breeze blowing across the rough surface of raw grass and weeds, put the dream of the new variety succinctly: “We’re going to pair a Zorba the Greek grape with a French bohemian grape, and see how well their kids like living in California.”

The hope is to have wine on the market from Popelouchum within two years, and to begin to show results from the breeding program within a decade. “Look, we have two barrels already,” Grahm said. “There are Burgundy producers who don’t produce more than that. They’re not very *wealthy* Burgundy producers. . . .” For the moment, all that was visible of this utopian program was the crossed sticks and props intended for the vines as they mature over the summer.

Grahm looked out over the vineyard, and pointed out a cross on the highest nearby hilltop. “Yeah, this has always been a holy site,” he said, more quietly. “First to the local indigenous people, and then to the Spaniards, who attempted mass conversion. They put the cross up.” He paused, and added, “You know, I haven’t brought my mother up here yet, because of that.”

**T**here are people who think that Grahm is crazy and people who think he’s a genius, and the people who think he’s a genius are also the ones most inclined to think he’ll fail. Eric Asimov, the *Times* wine writer, is a typically bemused fan. “It would be completely predictable that he would come up with something like this,” he says. “It’s fascinating, creative, iconoclastic, and makes for great talk. Why it may not be *feasible* is the timeline he’s put on it. Achieving something within ten years? The monks took centuries in Burgundy. Maybe tech can speed that up a little bit, but it’s hard to expect that within a decade there will be some kind of new, magic grapevines that

express the soul of this place that's never before grown grapes or anything except grass and weeds.”

Paul Draper, the Ridge winemaker, has another take, which is that for all Grahm's talk of passion for a *vin de terroir*, his real gift is for blending and mixing wines, more often with shrewdly purchased grapes than with homegrown ones. He's a winemaker, more than a wine grower. “I've always felt that one of his greatest joys is his amazing creativity in putting together wines that represent his ideal, almost a Platonic form,” Draper says. “I can't actually *imagine* Randall in Burgundy tied to one plot of grapes, trying to reproduce the same wine year after year. Randall would be bored to tears doing that. What he did by creating these wines of such quality was to really free himself from what terroir would have tied him down to.”

Many people would insist that American wines of place already exist. Though Paul Draper is too modest to say it, he thinks of his Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon as very much a *vin de terroir*, produced in one small vineyard year after year. Grahm's real complaint is that ambitious California wines have been versions of French ones, hyped up on steroids, and that these wines lead the French to make hyped-up versions of their own. The Great California Wine, he feels, should be a thing in itself. A Barolo doesn't aspire to be a Burgundy, and a California wine should be an American thing that just wants to be an American thing.

In a way, Grahm has already made that American thing, as have many other American winemakers. His existing wines express six different places at once, which is, after all, a very American idea of place. If the great California grape is many grapes, perhaps the great American terroir already exists in the very act of widely sourced and “manipulated” winemaking, while purity of place remains the illusion. “Life on the Mississippi,” is, after all, a greater American book than “Little House on the Prairie.”

**I**f Grahm's long-term ambition at Popelouchum is to breed entirely new varieties of grape—or perhaps an entire vineyard of ever so slightly different grapes, chiming together, as he says, “polyphonically, not cacophonously,” in the Great American Wine—his short-term vision, whose realization is already under way, is to use obscure European varieties that, when adapted to New World conditions, might make wines that have the complexity and the mystery of an Old World wine.

“My ambition is always the same—to make a wine in California that’s comparable to a great Burgundy,” he says. “But the means change.” Where once the grapes were the foreground and the place the background, now the place is the subject, and the grapes merely a means of transmission.

When Grahm is on a tasting jag, he likes to lay out ten or twelve different bottles of wine based on a grape he’s exploring, and ask a friend to taste with him, usually a friend whose tastes are practical and analytic, as Grahm’s are searching and romantic. His favorite tasting companion—in a symmetry that not even Heidegger could have imagined—is a fellow Santa Cruz wine pro, John Locke, who shares with the great English empiricist of the same name many a hard-edged, skeptical attitude. Locke worked at Bonny Doon for many years, the Sancho to Grahm’s Don, and now runs his own winery, Birichino, in another part of Santa Cruz. He is the reality principle to Randall’s dreamy invocations of mystery. Grahm reaches for the empyrean, and Locke brings him back to earth, a table full of wine bottles between them.

“One of the grapes I have the highest hopes for is Rossese,” Grahm said. “It’s one of those genius grapes, hiding in plain sight. Rossese! When I first tasted it, it was too subtle for my taste at the time. It was very . . . *light*. But now I feel that Rossese is the missing link between Italy and France. It has the warmth of Grenache but the nerviness of a Dolcetto and, literally, it is the crossing point between France and Italy. Most Rossese is virused up the wazoo.”

The wine, poured in a back office at Bonny Doon, was light but complex, with an appealingly spicy and smoky nose. “If you can clean up the virus, there’s a treasure hiding underneath,” Locke commented, as he sniffed and swirled the wine in his glass. He is blond, round, politely terse, and has a smiling, slightly taunting manner. Grapevines, like the heroines in D. W. Griffith movies, are subject to every kind of trial: in addition to the pests that wipe out whole vineyards, more than sixty specific viruses unique to grapevines have been identified. Most are noxious, but some can be peripherally beneficial, or at least have consequences that are interesting to taste.

“No, John,” Grahm objected. “Sometimes the opposite happens. The virus *is* the treasure. In working on auto-tuning, you’ll see that recessive genes get expressed. Most are inferior, but a small percentage are better suited. And in the propagation the virus falls out. So you’re losing something, but something purer might emerge.” He sniffed.

“There’s roses and cherries and acid. This is probably how this wine has been made for two hundred years. These are rustic wines. It really is Burgundian in spirit.”

“Ah, Randall,” Locke said. “‘Burgundian in spirit?’” Locke deplores the adjective “Burgundian,” which he thinks is basically meaningless. “There is a little place in northern France, and that is called Burgundy. And you know what? That’s where you’ll find the Burgundian spirit.”

“Yes, but there *is* some quality that unifies all those different, disparate styles,” Grahm insisted. “It’s ethereal, it’s eloquent—it’s earthiness *and* elegance. You can’t always drink Burgundy, but there are other wines. Like high-altitude Grenache. Ones with unequivocally non-Burgundian Burgundian qualities.”

Locke swirled and swallowed. “Let’s break it down into triads,” he said. “With every interesting flavor, there usually turn out to be three specific, nameable elements that create the mystery, and all the rest of that. One food, one spice, one flower. Like Côte-Rôtie: bacon and pepper and—what?—wild thyme? The word you want is ‘triads.’ The adjective that maybe you’re looking for to describe this mystery is more floral than fruit. It’s simply ‘Alpine.’ ”

“You mean ‘mentholated?’” Grahm cried out, almost in pain.

“‘Alpine.’ That’s really what the so-called ‘Burgundian aspect,’ with scare quotes, really is. Floral top note, high-altitude, but at the same time there’s the basso-continuo note of the forest floor. Alpine.”

A lighter Rossese was opened and poured. It came out pinkish orange in the glass.

“It’s good!” Grahm said. “It’s light, but delicious.” Then he sighed. “This watery is a hard sell in a Parkerized world.”

“It depends on how much you have to sell,” Locke said, and shrugged. “A hundred cases in Brooklyn or Oakland? We can do it. In Dallas or Los Angeles? You’d have to do data mining on men who spend a lot on beer and facial-grooming products.” Oakland is the Brooklyn of San Francisco, and assumed to be a hot spot for *recherché* wine.

“It does have surprising minerality,” Graham asserted.

“Twenty years ago, you want to sell wine to a geeky buyer, you said ‘hang time’—meaning how long the wine remained on the palate—and ten years ago you said ‘terroir,’ and now it’s ‘minerality.’ ”

“O.K., call it a kinetic quality on the palate. Minerality *is* a thing.”

“Chablis, champagne, Sancerre—minerality is *chalk*.” Locke tasted, and then said, “That’s my second most hated word in the wine world right now, ‘minerality.’ ” He paused, and waited. “My *most* hated is ‘Burgundian.’ ‘Minerality’ means something. Maybe. ‘Burgundian’ means: something to sell.”

Graham stared at his friend. “You’re denying *minerality*?” he said at last, like a theologian in the presence of an ex-priest denying the Holy Spirit. But then he sighed again. “We have all these explanations for everything, and still things make no sense,” he added.

“You don’t *want* it to be solved,” Locke urged. “What would that feel like? ‘The great wine mystery solved! Let’s move on to Cheddar cheese.’ ” He swirled and, this time, downed his glass.

**N**ot long after the tasting, Graham returned, for the first time in a quarter century, to his original vineyard in the actual town of Bonny Doon. He drove up a steep and winding road in the Santa Cruz Mountains, deep in a redwood forest, to see the old place. Where the hillside of Popelouchum feels vast and soft and visionary, a lookout with prosperity unrolling all around, the older vineyard, set back from the road, seems shaded and secret and a little small, a young man’s green laboratory. The giant redwood trees cast shade—the coolness they help create was one of the reasons he thought the land would work for Pinot Noir—and make the place feel more like a retreat than a launching pad. Perhaps most places where a creative life begins have some of that quality: we pick out starting points that are a bit hidden, so that others won’t see us practicing our leaps.

The fields having long ago been sold and replanted, nothing of his failed Pinot Noir—or the Marsanne and the Syrah that replaced it—remains. His original tasting room, down the road from the vineyard, is still used by the current grower, who produces his own Pinot Noir, which Graham tries to treat politely. Driving slowly around the old



place, another dream plot up in the Santa Cruz Mountains, he seemed unusually quiet. For many imaginative people, artists or winemakers, life always feels like a failure seen from inside; where the rest of us can see only the accomplishments, they see the unrealized scale of the ambitions that preceded the accomplishments.

“I know perfectly well that there are elements in my character that have isolated me from people,” he said. “That the intensity of my obsessions often crowds out the expression of my affections. There’s no one in the world I love more than my daughter, but I struggle to explain the importance of all this to her.” He paused. “You know, most of the greatest wines are not drinkable when they’re young at all. They’re like Henry Miller or Picasso. You have to wait seventy years before they’re civilized.” In the presence of his first ambitions, long plowed under, his determination to put his working life on the line on a single hilltop, untested but still his own, suddenly seemed logical. As we age, the search changes: the inebriating mysteries matter less, and the small sustaining explanations matter more. ♦

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Grahm’s honors thesis was on Heidegger’s concept of Dasein; it was his senior thesis. The article also incorrectly stated that Grahm planted Roussette, not Roussanne, grapes, and that he planted Grenache in Bonny Doon.

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