

Big House and Cardinal Zin go from Bonny Doon to The Wine Group

31 Jul 2006 by JR

Randal Graham of Bonny Doon is seeking to return to his roots and concentrate on truly terroir-driven, biodynamic wines by selling his two most successful wine brands, Big House and Cardinal Zin to The Wine Group LLC, the management-owned wine company based in San Francisco. The Wine Group produces the likes of Francis, Concannon, Gam Elen, Cuddeback Canyon, Fish Eye, Magno David, Cassira, and Tibouss. Founded in 1981 by a management buy-out of the wine assets of The Coca-Cola Bottling Company of New York, The Wine Group currently claims to be the world's third largest wine producer by volume.

We are not told the purchase price but it will presumably give Graham some time to breathe, dream up a few of the aphorisms which make him so quotable that he has been banned as a source by some wine editors (he makes life just too easy for us journalists...) and do some strategic thinking rather than just chasing his tail trying to keep up with the quantities needed for these highly successful brands.

"I had envisioned a catchy headline like, 'Big House brand escapes the shackles of the tyranny of terroirism,' but thought better of it," commented Graham. "We have been joking around for so long, it is hard for people to know when we are in fact serious." La Cigrae Vivant, his homages to Châteauneuf-du-Pape, along with other well-known wines the prototype Rhône Ranger has created over the years will continue to be wholly owned, produced and sold by Bonny Doon. It is planned that the Pacific Rim brand, mainly Redwing, will relocate its production to the area of Washington and will eventually function as an autonomous entity distinct from that of Bonny Doon Vineyard.

"The rapid growth of [these two brands] in the last several years has stressed our own resources and infrastructure to the max," stated Graham. "This sale allows us to return to our roots, as it were, and re-focus on the production of unique and distinctive, biodynamically produced wines, ones that truly express a sense of place. I have been raving on long enough about the transcendental value of terroir; it is now time to translate mere words into deeds. (We are not so much down-sizing, as down-sizing, creating a company that is more congruent with our deepest values.) That being said, it has been an exhilarating and heady ride to grow the brands as we have done. I greatly appreciate the contributions and efforts of those dedicated souls who have helped build these brands with us."

Pete Laska, President of Underberg Wine Merchants, commented, "This is a tremendous opportunity to add two truly iconic brands to our international portfolio of fun and distinctive wines. Big House and Cardinal Zin will fit right at home with our emerging brands such as Pinot D'A, Tempra Tarentum, Kilar Juice and Harding Cins (at this point I wondered whether this entire thing wasn't some elaborate - JOE). We don't envision making any changes to Mr Graham's inspired blends and we hope to build upon his tradition of dynamic and innovative packaging."

Big House, launched in 1995, and Cardinal Zin were among the first super premium California wines to be offered for wide-scale distribution on Svalvin® screwcap, which began with the 2001 vintage, and has helped to propel the overall acceptance of screwcap closures in the American market.

Paul Tudor, Basket Press, NZ:

Speaking of Pinot Noir and Kilar Juice, I note that this story on Randal Graham's latest adventures has last updated '31 July 2006' and Publication date '1 Aug 06'. Talk about "ubiquitous"! This odd conjunction of dates adds an even greater air of anomaly to the story... And while on Harding Cins, have any Purple Pages tried the wine? I am REALLY curious (sorry - but jk!)

Now you, or whom the sun rises first, should most easily understand the strange conjunction. I wrote the article at Barn 01 aug, my time here in Sydney, but when it was published, it was still (quite) 31 Jul back in the UK where the jancisrobinson.com Mailerlock is kept. As for Harding Cins etc, I have not an inkling either.

Neil Knox, San Francisco:
I heard that Kilar Juice is what Mel Gibson was drinking when he got pulled over by a Jewish cop in LA.
I have had the Harding Cins wine... I thought it was a bit meh...