



Sunny with
a few rain
showers



California's Pacific Rim moves north

By Paul Gregutt

Special to *The Seattle Times*

It has become almost commonplace for celebrity winemakers to visit Washington state. They come from France, Australia, Italy, Germany and California — some to consult, some to make wines collaboratively. But more and more, they come to stay

Make no mistake about it; these high profile people are not lured by the prospect of doing Washington a favor. They lend their names and talents to our grapes primarily because they know that the specific flavor profiles of these grapes cannot be duplicated elsewhere. So everyone wins. The newest celebrity enterprise to appear in Washington is Randall Grahm's Pacific Rim Winemakers. It was Grahm's talent for wacky marketing ploys — rather than any special winemaking ability — that launched his Bonny Doon winery and its associated brands, and built his global reputation as a pioneering California Rhone Ranger.

Grahm started Pacific Rim in 1992, making about 1,000 cases of a dry riesling. As production grew, it became difficult to source all the riesling grapes needed from California. So a mix of fruit from California, Washington and Germany was used.

Recently, Grahm sold his two biggest brands — Big House and Cardinal Zin — in order to downsize and refocus his business. Also on the block, confirms former Bonny Doon general manager Nicolas Quillé, was Pacific Rim.

The talented Quillé, who holds winemaking degrees from universities in Dijon (Burgundy) and Reims (Champagne), along with a masters in business from the University of Washington, had been hired to oversee the downsizing of the company. With the successful sale of Big House and Cardinal Zin, he realized that there was

no future for him at Bonny Doon, which had shrunk from 400,000 to 40,000 cases. But Quillé liked the Pacific Rim riesling, and he saw an opportunity that Grahm had missed. "I said to Randall," he told me, "instead of selling Pacific Rim, why don't you let me take it up north?"

Pacific Rim had become the top-selling American riesling in the \$9-\$11 category. It made sense, thought Quillé, to move the operation to Washington. He had spent five years making wines at Hogue and saw that Washington was quickly becoming the riesling capital of the New World. And besides, this is where most of the Pacific Rim fruit was being sourced.



Laura Morton / special to the Seattle Times
Randall Grahm moved Pacific Rim from California to West Richland, Wash. The goal is to reach 300,000 cases, 95 percent of it riesling, within five years.

The new winemaking facility opened in West Richland (Tri-Cities) just in time for the 2007 crush. Production is already up to 130,000 cases, and the goal, says Quillé, is to reach 300,000 — 95 percent of it riesling — within the next five years. In the market right now you will find Pacific Rim's 2006 releases. (Note that due to an odd wrinkle in the law, some do not carry a vintage date.)

It's clear that — despite the celebrity bankrolling the brand — the real stars of the show are growers Bill and Andy den Hoed, and Quillé himself, who is both

general manager and winemaker. The den Hoed family, partners in Pacific Rim, have committed 120 acres at their spectacular Wallula vineyard in the Horse Heaven Hills to biodynamic farming. Another large vineyard in the Grandview area is moving toward more traditional organic viticulture.

The Pacific Rim Dry Riesling (\$11) remains the trademark wine of the lineup, and the only one that is not yet made entirely from Washington grapes (the last of the California grapes were used in 2005). It includes a significant (20 percent) portion of German riesling in the blend, a decision, Quillé admits, that doesn't make sense financially.

Cost aside, his reasoning is sound. "It's very difficult to make a balanced dry riesling in a warmer climate like Washington," he explains. "We're looking for something more mineral, stony. Bringing that German fraction to the dry riesling gives me that flinty character, very focused and sharp, with naturally high acid."

Also in the current lineup are a sweet riesling, a gewürztraminer and a chenin blanc (the Pick of the Week). All are beautifully packaged, with screwcaps and colorful labels showing Asian-influenced iconography in a see-through bottle. Apart from the artistic value, these wines are loaded with useful information about food pairing, and they clearly state the sweetness (or dryness) of the wines.

Even more exciting are the wines from 2007 that are still waiting in the wings.

Set for a spring release are four single-vineyard rieslings that will showcase different winemaking styles. The first, from Willamette Valley grapes, will be done in the style of a German kabinet. Another, from the Yakima Valley, will be what Quillé describes as Alsatian. A third will be the biodynamically-farmed Wallula vineyard Riesling — hand-

picked, hand-sorted and handmade, with no additions of yeast or nutrients or acid. The fourth will also come from Wallula, but will be a bit sweeter and riper, more like the classic Washington Johannisberg rieslings.

"We want Pacific Rim to be recognized as the best riesling producer in the country," says Quillé. "In order to do that, we've got to make killer wines, we need to have a certain presence in the marketplace [e.g. volume] and we have to keep innovating and take a position of leadership in the Riesling world."

Doesn't Chateau Ste. Michelle already hold that position? After all, they make 700,000 cases of riesling, the most in the world. When people think riesling, that's who comes to mind.

Quillé is undaunted. "We're going to change that," he insists. "They're a great company, and they've been setting the pace for many years. We are different — a different price point, different styles and different grape sourcing. I agree that right now they are the volume player. But we intend to take the higher end in the country. There's a lot of room to claim riesling leadership in terms of quality and thoughtfulness in the winemaking."

The gauntlet has been thrown. It should be a great match, consumers, and guess what? You all — and Washington state — will be the winners.

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PACIFIC RIM WINEMAKERS