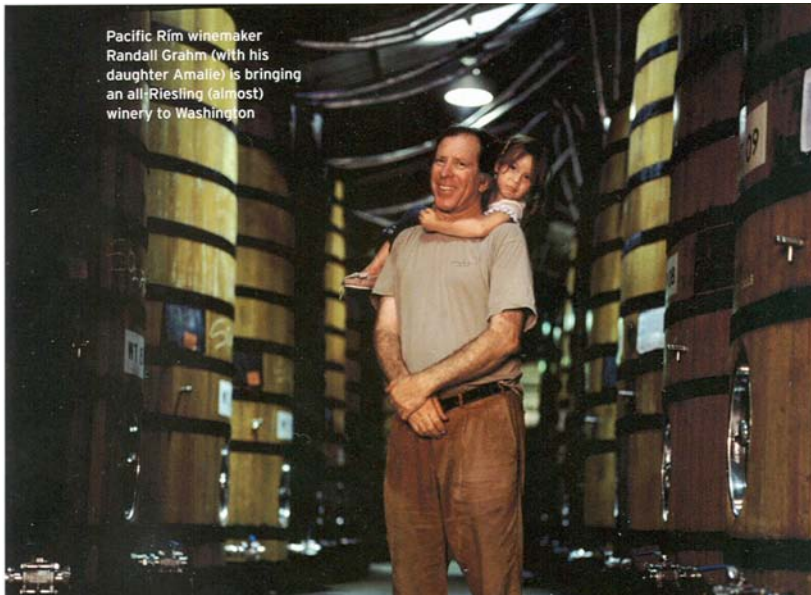


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Pacific Rim winemaker Randall Graham (with his daughter Amalle) is bringing an all-Riesling (almost) winery to Washington



PACIFIC RIM

RIESLING RANGER

Bonny Doon's Randall Graham banks on the future of Washington's favorite white wine **By Shannon Borg**

ECCENTRIC WINEMAKER and original Rhône Ranger (he almost single-handedly popularized Rhône-style wines in the United States over the past decade or so), Randall Graham made a name for himself with quirky, philosophical labels for his easy-drinking but still top-notch wines. His Santa Cruz, California-based company, Bonny Doon Vineyard, is known for its Big House White, Big House Red (both blends of Rhône and Italian varietals) and other European-style blends. But last year, Graham decided to downsize his Bonny Doon holdings, selling the Big House and Cardinal Zin brands and taking on a new project—producing Riesling in Washington state.

While the marketing for his Washington label, Pacific Rim Winemakers, is less quirky than for Bonny Doon, the vision for his project is alluring: an almost-all-Riesling winery (with one Chenin Blanc) just outside of Richland. He's hired Nicholas Quillé, former winemaker at Hogue Cellars, as general manager and winemaker, allowing Graham to oversee the project with visits here a few times a year.

Even though Pacific Rim Winemakers hopes to produce a vast amount of wine (they produced more than 120,000 cases this year with plans to grow to 300,000), it is still a David to Chateau Ste. Michelle's (CSM) Goliath when it comes to Riesling. CSM produces more than 700,000

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SHANNON'S WINE PICKS



PACIFIC RIM DRY RIESLING, \$10.99

Crisp acidity and aromas of lime and green apple make this a great food wine. Blended with 20 percent German Riesling and kept on the lees (the yeast in the wine tank) for six months to add flavor and complexity, this wine is a good expression of a classic *trocken* (dry) Riesling style. **PAIRS WITH:** Charcuterie and mild to medium-sharp cheeses.

PACIFIC RIM CHENIN BLANC, \$10.99

Fresh aromas and flavors of grapefruit, lime peel and freshly cut grass, this wine enters the lineup because Nicholas Quillé feels Chenin Blanc is one of the great food wines of his native France. Softer than the Dry Riesling, this versatile wine is a refreshing glass on its own. **PAIRS WITH:** Fresh oysters on the half shell.

PACIFIC RIM SWEET RIESLING, \$10.99

Balance is what Riesling is all about, and although this wine has a high (7 percent) residual sugar, it also has enough acidity to keep it from being flabby. Its bright peach and pineapple and other tropical flavors are a great match with spicy Thai or other Asian foods. **PAIRS WITH:** General Tso's chicken.

PACIFIC RIM VIN DE GLACIERE, \$16.99

A great holiday gift, this sweet little bottle holds a bit of liquid gold, with rich flavors of candied apricot and orange blossom. Made from grapes that are frozen post-harvest and then pressed, leaving the ice with the skins, losing about half of the water. The resulting wine is very concentrated and sweet (and higher in alcohol at 9 percent). But again, high acidity keeps it from being cloying. **PAIRS WITH:** Apricot tart.

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cases per year of up to eight different Rieslings. But with food-friendly, lower-alcohol Riesling gaining a following and reconverting those who dismissed it as merely a simple, sweet wine, Graham's bid to capitalize on that market is probably a safe bet.

But safe has never been what Graham is about. Along with his role in popularizing Rhône-style wines, he soapboxes on issues from screw caps ("Vive le screw cap!") to biodynamic wine-making. He plans on making his Pacific Rim wines biodynamically at his new Wallula Vineyard (near the Columbia River's Wallula Gap)—a holistic philosophy of farming that espouses planting according to moon and sun cycles, encouraging beneficial insects, fertilizing with natural compost teas, not using pesticides and adhering to other strict practices meant to create not only great-tasting wines, but also a healthy connection between the farmer and the land.

The Pacific Rim wines themselves—all nonvintage with no specific vineyards listed on the label—range from bone-dry to semisweet to dessert styles, but all share Graham's and Quillé's philosophy that Riesling should "express terroir," meaning the wines should have the aromas and flavor characteristics produced by the soil and climate they were grown in, rather than using oak barrels that add woody tones or malolactic fermentation (inoculating the wine with bacteria or heating it to soften acids).

As Riesling lovers know, this can be one of the most complex wines in the world, with aromas and flavors running from crisp green apple to peach to tropical fruit aromas, gaining elegance as they age and develop. And even though Riesling has been Washington's cash cow (one of the first large-scale wines produced here), time will tell whether Graham and company's foray will create wines that are both approachable and age-worthy, doing justice to one of Washington's most successful—and promising—grapes. **S**

