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Eccentric Bonny Doon owner sells two brands

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BY [Chris Rauber](#)

Randall Grahm, owner of [Bonny Doon Vineyard](#) and one of the wine industry's most charismatic characters, said late Monday he's sold two of his leading wine brands to The [Wine Group LLC](#) for an undisclosed amount.

Santa Cruz-based Bonny Doon sold its Big House and Cardinal Zin brands to the privately held Wine Group, based in San Francisco, one of the nation's largest wine producers. The wines will be produced by the Wine Group's new [Underdog Wine Merchants](#) division.

The sale involves the brand names, inventories, grape supply contracts and key brand icons, according to a July 31 statement. The deal was shepherded by Robert Nicholson of Healdsburg-based [International Wine Associates](#), a strategic and financial advisor to Bonny Doon.

Grahm's Le Cigare Volant and other Bonny Doon wines will continue to be wholly owned, produced and sold by Bonny Doon, according to the company. Industry sources say Bonny Doon's revenue last year approached \$27 million.

Fritz Lance, president of the new Underdog Wine unit, said the purchase added two "truly iconic brands to our international portfolio of fun and distinctive wines," including emerging brands such as Pinot Evil, Tempra Tantrum, Killer Juice and Herding Cats. "We don't envision making any changes to Mr. Grahm's inspired blends and we hope to build upon his tradition of dynamic and innovative packaging."

The Wine Group sold 42 million cases of wine last year, ranking third among U.S. wine producers behind only [E&J Gallo Winery](#) and [Constellation Brands](#), according to Wine Business Monthly magazine's Feb. 15 annual list of the top 30 U.S. wine companies. The tight-lipped, management-owned company produces well-known brands such as Franzia, Concannon, Glen Ellen, Corbett Canyon, Fish Eye and Mogen David.

"I had envisioned a catchy headline like 'Big House brand escapes the shackles of the tyranny of terroirism,' but I thought better of it," Grahm said in a July 31 news release. "We have been joking around for so long, it is hard for people to know when we are in fact serious."

Grahm said the rapid growth of the Big House and Cardinal Zin brands in the last several years "has stressed our own resources and infrastructure to the max," adding that the sale allows his company to "return to its roots" and focus on the production of distinctive biodynamically produced wines that will "truly express a sense of place" -- a concept known in wine making as "terroir."

"We are not so much downsizing, as doon-sizing," Grahm continued, "creating a company that is more congruent with our deepest values."