

## Ode to a Toad

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*"If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen."*

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"Make mine a Chardonnay, no oak please."

Todd Williams didn't like oaky Chardonnay and he didn't blindly follow the styles of the market makers in the early 1990s. He had his own ideas about how Chardonnay should be made. He vinified his Chardonnay in stainless steel tanks when it seemed like the entire California wine industry was doing the opposite. He swam against a river of 'California style' oaky, buttery Chardonnay and he not only succeeded, but excelled.

He and long time friend Rodney Strong decided to create a line of quality fine wines, priced under \$20, as a project to dabble in while enjoying retirement. Both gentlemen had experience in the wine industry; Strong brought his winemaking expertise and connections with growers, while Williams brought his attention-grabbing, humorous marketing style to the partnership. Neither one realized their little project would give birth to the benchmark to which all domestic unoaked Chardonnay would be judged.

While brainstorming what their new line of wines would consist of, Williams insisted that the Chardonnay, and most of the rest of the line, be vinified in stainless steel. The entire wine industry was obsessed with creating wines with oak flavors, and Williams knew he would have a huge audience if he offered the market quality unoaked wines. The two men then created an icon with an age-old recipe for making Chardonnay — their guidelines were taken from Chablis, France. The first vintage of Toad Hollow Chardonnay was produced in 1993. It was a mere 3,000 cases and sold out immediately.

The Toad Hollow labels are whimsical. Each bottle has a line drawing of a toad in various action shots (a caricature of Williams). Norman Rockwell meets wine-sipping amphibians. Occasionally another cartoon character joins the Toad. A wine glass touting Badger, Strong's persona, relaxes with the Toad on their Toad Hollow Eye Of Toad, Rosé of Pinot Noir. Both were enamored with Pinot Noir, which shows in the quality of their Rosé and in Rod's Pride Russian River Pinot Noir. The grapes for Rod's Pride comes from Strong's own vineyard, called Goldie's Vines, named after Strong's mother. The Rod's Pride label features the Toad catching air in dance, a tribute to Strong's days as a professional dancer in Paris and on Broadway.

Although Williams liked his toads, he also liked the underdogs. He believed in the little guy, whether it was a small distribution company, grass-roots charity, cozy wine shop or fledgling wine writer. Williams was generous to his community, his business partners, employees, family and even perfect strangers. He created a wine label specifically to raise funds for Katrina relief. The label — you guessed it — features the Toad wearing a tool belt, hard hat, wielding a hammer, in shin deep water. He called it Recovery Merlot.

Rodney Strong passed away in March of 2006 from stroke complications. His dear friend Dr. Toad continued to make wine, embrace the world with his generosity and his humor, while paying tribute to his partner. But the world would soon lose Williams too. On August 14,

2007, Todd Williams passed away from a heart condition. A sad irony, when you think: How can a man with the biggest heart around be taken in this way?

Todd Williams was never one to stand in someone's shadow, even if the shadow was large enough to extend all the way from Hollywood to his tasting room in Healdsburg, Calif. Most people know his brother, Robin, while Dr. Toad Williams earned a well-known reputation in the wine industry and among wine drinkers as someone with a hilarious sense of humor and a love of life on his own. He and Strong will live on through their wines, on their labels and in our wine glasses.

Williams posted a statement about life on the winery bulletin board that reads: "Pearls of Wisdom From The Toad: Life should NOT be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving Safely in an attractive and well preserved body, but rather to skid in Sideways, chocolate in one hand, wine in the other, body thoroughly used up, totally worn out and screaming "HOO HAAH what a RIDE!"

Brenda Francis is a certified sommelier. She publishes a weekly wine newsletter available at [redwhiteandrose.com](http://redwhiteandrose.com).