

THE BOUNTY OF BIEN NACIDO

The vineyard's varied soils and grapes produce few common characteristics - except excellence



By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers
4:31 p.m. CDT, June 13, 2014

The more famed of the globe's vineyards each tend to be owned by one or only a few people and specialize — if that's the word — in one and perhaps a few ancillary grape varieties. Burgundy's Le Montrachet is a good example: one grape, chardonnay; a few owners. Bordeaux's Chateau Latour is another: one owner, four grapes, mostly cabernet sauvignon, a bit of merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot for the blend.

But while the Bien Nacido Vineyard, certainly one of the more distinguished vineyards in California, is owned by one family (the Millers, a fifth-generation California clan) and grows many different grape varieties on its nearly 900 acres of vineyard, it is best known by the long roster of winemakers who have so successfully used those grapes to make their consistently award-winning wines since the 1980s.

It's time for a famous California winemaker roll call: Qupe, Au Bon Climat, Foxen, Gary Farrell, Ojai, Villa Mt. Eden, Bonny Doon, Tyler, Duckhorn — and Bien Nacido Vineyards Winery itself, late in the game when listed with the others (it started as a winery in 2005).

Bien Nacido Vineyard, about 20 miles from the Pacific Ocean and southeast of the town of Santa Maria, grows some of California's tastiest chardonnay, syrah and pinot noir (the three for which it is most reputed), as well as a mix of nine other grape varieties, including some of the state's only refosco and nebbiolo.

Many different soil mixtures and rock outcroppings mark Bien Nacido Vineyard, and, as a result of so much shared demand, the vineyard is broken up into and named by many different

"blocks," some of which encompass unique soil profiles, others of which are just letter or number names. You almost always see Bien Nacido Vineyard "Block" designations on wines made of its grapes. The winemakers are proud of what their allocated real estate gives them.

It's difficult to say, given all the different blocks and the several styles of winemaking, that there exists a Bien Nacido "character" to this varied terroir and, hence, its wines. Some generalizations are possible; My students and I found some in a tasting of 10 wines from seven winemakers, all the fruit for which came from the vineyard only.

The syrahs are definitely cool-climate syrah; the Santa Maria Valley, home to Bien Nacido, is one of the cooler growing districts for wine grapes in all of California. That makes for syrahs that are wide open of bouquet, with notes of spice, both black and white pepper and game meat; overall, many layered and complex, with soft tannins and sparky finishes.

Chardonnay, a grape susceptible to winemaking technique like none other, is nonetheless singularly and similarly cool-climate: lots of aromas and flavors of white and pale yellow stone fruits, with grace notes of lemon zest or lemon curd. Acidities are not lacking; these chardonnays have focus.

And, my word, what pinot noirs! Again, cool-climate character, hence markedly black cherry, spicy and many layered, with telltale taut, bracing acidity. Some of the pinots in our tasting were very scented in minerals, an earthiness not often experienced in American pinot noirs, more commonly in Burgundy.

Recommended wines

Here are some highly recommended wines made from fruit grown on the Bien Nacido Vineyard, whites first, then reds. All wines carry the appellation "Bien Nacido Vineyard, Santa Maria Valley, California."

2010 Qupe Chardonnay Block Y: Hands down, best value among lot; lots of acidity ties down pear and cream flavors; so much length of flavor for so little money. \$20

2012 Foxen Chardonnay Block W: Lees aging for eight months adds an unsalted butter roundness; lots of lemon curd. \$32

2010 Foxen Pinot Noir Block 8: Great aromas, inviting and effulgent; much color, concentration of ripe black cherry character, big but not clumsy. \$60

2010 Tyler Pinot Noir Block N: Supercrisp acidity to finish off the elegant, diaphanous texture and delivered flavors; a soft, pretty wine that combines delicacy with richness. \$65

2011 Migration Pinot Noir Block 1: The fruit is "candied," which just means it got ripe in a cool year; spice, smoke and earth mark its out edges. \$65

2012 Alta Maria Vineyards Pinot Noir Block G: One amazing pinot, perfect "pitch" on fruit and color; that is, nothing heavy, but so many never-ending layers of aroma and flavor — and minerals! — that it's nuclear. \$48

2010 Bien Nacido Vineyards Winery Syrah Block Z: A bit of syrah "funk" greets the nose, overlaying dark berry fruit character, mild tannins and a juicy texture. \$42

2008 Qupe Syrah Block Z: First-class ticket to the Rhone for \$100; rich, fat, bloody, amazing concentration so silkily delivered; effusive white pepper and acidity at the end, like a spark of static electricity on the tongue. \$100