



A WINE WRITER'S PLEASURES OF THE ROAD

by Steve Heimoff, December 10, 2012

There's nothing quite like being a wine writer and hitting the road. Every trip I take begins with a sense of adventure and ends with a degree of exhaustion. Inbetween is all the fun stuff.

My most recent journey, from which I returned yesterday afternoon, was Santa Barbara County, where I spent four days. I like going to Santa Barbara for many reasons: it's beautiful, the people there are very nice (both old and new friends), the weather is gorgeous, and above all the wines are very good. It always startles me, when I'm down there, to hear from vintners who are convinced the public at large and certain segments of the wine press remain ignorant of their wines. I don't have a clue why that would be. Whatever the cause, it's shameful, because Santa Barbara is an extremely important part of California's coastal wine terroir, and it's getting better all the time.

When you're a writer visiting a region you can only get to two or three times a year, it's vital to pack your schedule as fully as possible, to take advantage of every precious moment. That's why I was on the go from breakfast through dinner, each day, with multiple stops at wineries inbetween. It all culminated in my big blind tasting on Saturday at Bien Nacido, where I went through about 80 wines that had been bagged for me by **Chris and Dayna Hammell**. He's Bien Nacido's general manager (I think that's his title) and his wife, Dayna, is part of the team, and a more likeable, professional and helpful duo could not be imagined.

Eighty wines is a lot, for me anyway, so I needed to pace myself in the days leading up to the tasting. That required getting a good night's sleep, which meant in some cases shortening the dinners (cutting out the dessert course isn't a bad idea anyway), but I think my hosts understood; after all, they want me to be in good shape so that my judgment is sound, as much as I want to be in good shape. It may sound obvious, but it's really unthinkable that a wine critic would taste wines when he or she is feeling lousy or tired. I'm sure it happens, but I wouldn't want it to happen to me.

Of those eighty wines, perhaps one-third were Pinot Noirs, and many if not most of them were from either the Bien Nacido Vineyard or the Solomon Hills Vineyard, both of which are owned by the Miller family. The best way to taste wine is in flights of the same type, and the closer in origin the wines are, the better you can make minute judgments. In this case, all the wines were very closely related, so the quality differences between them stood out as clearly as if they'd been etched in stone. It also became clear afterward, as I debagged the wines, that some blocks in Bien Nacido are much better than others, and these are generally sold to longtime customers or, I think, to younger customers somehow lucky enough to get access to them. We all know that old saying "Great wine is made in the vineyard" and in the case of Bien Nacido it's evident, but the vineyard is a large one, and some areas are better than others. The Pinot Noirs that came from these top blocks or rows clearly stood out above the others, not just in concentration but in complexity and overall balance. (Rick Longoria's Bien Nacido Pinot was really great, even in that august crowd.)

After the tasting, my schedule mercifully permitted me to spend my last night, Saturday, alone, except, of course, for Gus. I'd earlier gone to one of my favorite roadside joints, Pappy's, where the 101 hits Betteravia Road. Pappy's is like stepping back to some retro 1950s era diner of big hair on waitresses wearing jeans perhaps wrapped a little too tight. There, I'd bought a gigantic chicken burrito to go (3 pounds? Felt like it) and taken it back to where I was staying in the Red House, right in the middle of Bien Nacido, where so many itinerant writers bed down for the night in simple but hospitable and certainly picturesque pleasure. As the sky darkened and the stars came out thicker than I'd seen them in years (Orion, directly overhead, shined as light as bulbs) I kicked back tired but happy, watched T.V. with Gus in my lap, and inhaled the better part of the burrito. I'd had quite enough wine; with my supper I drank Perrier.