



THINKING AND DRINKING WITH A FRIEND IN A VINEYARD

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I'm on the deck of Bien Nacido Vineyards's little red house, looking west over the lower part of the vineyard, now bare of grapes except for some late harvest Pinot Blanc remaining to be picked. The sun will shortly set; the day's last light is golden, giving this part of the Santa Maria Valley a spacious luster I'd never noticed before. We speak often of climate and soil in discussions of terroir, but rarely of light: how the rays of the sun arch out above the landscape, how the sky glows during the daylight hours, the energy of light pervading the environment, suffusing it in life. The sky over Bien Nacido is big, very big—horizon to horizon big, the kind of expanse you imagine in Texas, or the Canadian tundra. The light seems to come from everywhere, down from the sky, up from the ground, dripping like honey off the mountains. Light in this valley comes early and stays late this far south, where the days are longer than up north, where I live. The light is quite literally alive.

The ball of the sun reddens and sinks. Directly to the west, out beyond the Bettaravia flats and Santa Maria City, is the Pacific. Today was warm, even for Santa Barbara County this time of the year, with the temperature in the mid-70s, but already at this hour the land is giving up the heat, fast, and in the growing chill I fancy I can feel the cold ocean. I smell the ice in the Gulf of Alaska, like a sharp pinch in the nostrils. You have to get further south than this, to Malibu, before you have a sense of the tropics. In the Santa Maria Valley, the elements remind you this is Central, not Southern, California.

Staying the night in a winery house alone, in the midst of a vineyard, is an occupational necessity for a wine writer, but also a rare gift. Most people never get the opportunity. It's very quiet, as you'd expect (a particular treat for an inner city denizen like me). After dark, the workers all go home, and you're alone, all by yourself, in the country. (Well, Gus is with me, so I'm not really alone.) One time when I was here, I tried to imagine being a grapevine. The quietude does that. Being a citified wine critic, there's always the danger of losing your connection to and appreciation of what wine really is: an agricultural product. I've known a lot of vineyard managers over the years, and I never quite feel like we're living on the same plane. They dwell in a realm of seasons and insects and mold and wild critters and weather and grape prices and buyer contracts. A writer must know a little about a lot of different things, but not a lot about

anything. Conversations between writers and true experts, like growers, are truncated, but you try to come away knowing a little more than you knew before.

A word, too, about drinking while you're staying in a winery guest house. I always bring a few emergency bottles with me when I travel. You never know if the place you're staying will have any. I've stayed in winery guest houses where I was surprised to find nothing. Not that I expect freebies, but...hence my emergency stashes. This time I brought a Byron Pinot (to honor Santa Maria Valley) and a Mer Soleil Chardonnay, because that's a style I like. I enjoy getting high when I'm alone in a winery guest house. Not drunk: there's a difference between high, which is a pleasant buzz, and sloshed. I haven't been drunk in many years, because my body tells me when to stop. It would be perverse to stay the night in the middle of a vineyard and not enjoy the fruit of the vine.

Later, Bien Nacido's great vineyard manager, Chris Hammell, stopped by. We drained a bottle of Ojai Syrah (from Melville Vineyard) and talked about viticulture for a little while, before discovering that he's a student of Brazilian Ju-Jitsu while I of course have my history of Japanese karate-do. That was pretty much it. The next few hours were all about fighting, senseis and all that stuff, not wine. No disrespect to wine, but just because you're both in the industry doesn't mean it's the only thing you can talk about. Wine unites us in humanity; drinking together opens that union to wherever it wants to go.