

Vint-ed

A wine critic's sips and swirls, by Edward Deitch

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Sips: an exciting new twist for California's Bien Nacido Vineyard

Until now, the name "Bien Nacido Vineyard" was found only on other people's wine labels. The famed vineyard located in the Santa Maria Valley of California's Santa Barbara County is the source of grapes for many well-known wineries that turn to Bien Nacido for its exceptional fruit. Much of that fruit, as I saw for myself on a visit to Bien Nacido a few years ago, is grown on fairly steep mountain vineyards in the cool-climate region, a combination that gives the wines both opulence and finesse. Wineries that draw on Bien Nacido read like a who's who of notable properties in the region: Ojai, Qupé, Au Bon Climat, Byron, Fess Parker, Villa Mt. Eden, Longoria, to name just some of them. Typically on the labels of these wineries you'll see the Bien Nacido Vineyard designation. It's a kind of badge of honor.



Now, for the first time, Bien Nacido is bottling wines, three of them, under its own labels – I say labels because two of the wines, a pinot noir and a syrah, are from the Bien Nacido Vineyard itself while a third, a chardonnay, is from the nearby Solomon Hills Vineyard, which Bien Nacido owns. The wines, which will be released in coming weeks, represent an excellent first effort, which is not surprising given the resources Bien Nacido has at its disposal. Nicholas Miller, a member of the family that owns Bien Nacido who is overseeing the new initiative, told me as we tasted the wines last week that he had three “consulting” winemakers at his disposal (he wouldn't disclose who they were).

As for the wines, the 2008 Solomon Hills Chardonnay, \$43, is a nicely balanced effort, full of opulent fruit dominated by pear with a touch of mint, its relatively high alcohol (14.9 percent) moderated by good acids that leave a crisp impression. Oak is nicely integrated. The 2007 Bien Nacido Pinot Noir, \$57, has a bright overall feel with concentrated red fruit, a good deal of spice and some vanilla. It's an accessible but sophisticated pinot noir. The 2007 Bien Nacido Syrah is arguably the most interesting of the wines, showing a blackberry core accented by meat and leather, white pepper and mineral notes. Its complexity and cool-climate elegance showcase the vineyard's (and the region's) affinity for the variety.

Total production of the three wines is 400 cases or so. “We will always be growers first,” Nicholas Miller told me over dinner with his wife Shelly. “I am not looking to compete with our customer base.” In other words, Bien Nacido will continue to be a supplier of grapes to other wineries. The idea behind the new effort, he said, is to showcase the vineyard, which the wines do very well indeed.