

## A remarkable 'Italian' red from California

**The 2001 Bricco Buon Natale Barbera has lush fruit and an almost unbelievable price**

**By Edward Deitch**

Wine columnist

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For me, one of the summer's best food and wine pairings came the other night with a memorable red from California's Santa Barbara County. No, it was not pinot noir, the grape that played a leading role in "Sideways," the movie that injected Santa Barbara and its pinots into the popular culture last year.

The wine I enjoyed was the outstanding 2001 Bricco Buon Natale Barbera. That's right, barbera from southern California made by Jim Clendenen, who owns the well-known Au Bon Climat Winery and who also makes and champions Italian-inspired wines, some of them under the Bricco Buon Natale label. The other headline here is that the wine has a suggested price of just \$12, and may even be a couple of dollars less in some places. At last, an original California wine at a great price!

I call it original because of its pedigree. Unlike so many California bottlings that use anonymous and generic surplus grapes or juice, the fruit here is grown expressly for Clendenen at the famed Bien Nacido Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley (you'll see Bien Nacido on the label). With more than 900 acres of vines, Bien Nacido is in the business of supplying superb fruit to various small wineries, including Clendenen's. Whether pinot noir, chardonnay, syrah or other varieties, many wineries credit the vineyard on their labels as the source of the grapes, making them so-called vineyard designated wines.

The barbera piece of it may be a sideline for everyone involved, but the wine is, well, heavenly, and, like many of the vineyard's pinots and other varieties, showcases the extraordinary fruit that can be produced in this relatively cool-climate region with its long growing season.

You might think that a wine like this would be flying off the shelves, but Clendenen, who has been making so-called Cal-Italian wines as part of his mix for a couple of decades, told me that developing broader interest in the wines has been a tough sell. I'm willing to bet that a taste of the barbera will persuade wine drinkers — and distributors who have the power to get it out there — to grab it up.

Barbera, as you may know, is the second most important variety (after nebbiolo) in the Piedmont region of northwest Italy, where it produces wines that range from the ordinary to the outstanding (Clendenen has a nebbiolo bottling as well).

One of barbera's hallmarks is its pronounced acidity, which makes it such a good partner for hearty foods, like a slow-cooked meat sauce I decided to pair with this wine. To make the dish I sautéed a few links each of sweet and hot Italian sausages until browned, then added some finely chopped carrot, onion and garlic before

spooning in a big bowl of just-picked red, yellow and heirloom tomatoes, skinned, seeded and roughly chopped.

I let it all simmer for a few hours, stirring in some chopped fresh herbs (thyme, rosemary, oregano and basil), and eventually had myself a marvelously sweet, yet spicy ragu. Meanwhile, I had uncorked the barbera so it could breathe and open up for a couple of hours.

The wine had deep raspberry and plum aromas and was a ripe, dark fruit cocktail in the mouth, with notes of coffee and a considerable but not distracting oak presence. Concentrated, moderately tannic and brightly acidic, it had good balance and structure and a long, vivid finish.

As I hoped, the wine worked beautifully with my pasta sauce, each enhancing the enjoyment of the other. This fruit-forward wine, intense and lively, reflects California and Santa Barbara at their best.

Jim Clendenen told me the wine is available in some larger markets and said it could be ordered by going to [www.aubonclimat.com](http://www.aubonclimat.com) < <http://www.aubonclimat.com> > or by calling the winery at 805-937-9801.

By the way, I liked several other Bien Nacido wines: The Ojai Vineyard's 2002 Bien Nacido Pinot Noir (\$45); Flying Goat Cellars' 2003 Pinot Noir "Solomon Hills Vineyard" (a Bien Nacido property, \$35), and Qupe's 2003 Bien Nacido Roussanne (\$35), a lush and intriguing take on the northern Rhone variety.

#### **This Week's Wine**

Name: 2001 Bricco Buon Natale Barbera  
Type: Dry Red  
Country: United States  
Region: California, Santa Barbara County  
Grapes: Barbera  
Price: Around \$12

*Edward Deitch's wine column appears Wednesdays. He welcomes comments from readers. Write to him at [EdwardDeitch@hotmail.com](mailto:EdwardDeitch@hotmail.com).*

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