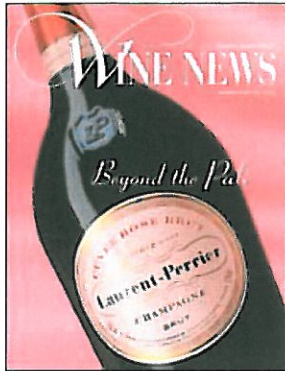


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KIRK IRWIN

The sprawling Bien Nacido Vineyard is located on elevated benchland near the town of Santa Maria about 17 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean; to the east lie foothills leading up to the Sierra Madre Mountains. In the 30 years that it has been under vine, this magnificent, undulating site has turned out an amazing array of award-winning Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, and Syrah. Merlot, too, but family spokesman Bob Miller figures that by 2008, “we’ll be out of the Merlot business,” he says, because he wants to concentrate on his other varieties.

Forty wineries buy some portion of the 2,200 to 2,600 tons of grapes harvested annually (vintage dependent) at Bien Nacido. Of these, 35 clients feature the vineyard name on their labels, taking advantage of its formidable reputation.

Bien Nacido overlooks the Sisquoc River, a part of the Santa Maria Valley watershed. The site is close enough to the ocean to enjoy cool nights and morning and far enough inland to experience moderately warm days; taken together, the climactic conditions prove ideal for gently ripening fine wines.

Vineyard manager Chris Hammell explains that the 800-

acre vineyard is composed of “light soil, predominantly gravelly, shaley, sandy loam, with more loamy soils as you approach the foothills.” He tailors the fertilization and irrigation applications to maintain “a moderate vigor.” Because this part of the Central Coast can be a virtual desert, irrigation delivers most of the moisture the vines receive. By applying water with restraint, Hammell spurs the roots to strike deeply, which then convey trace minerals up to the top growth of the vines – including the fruit. The aim is to intensify flavors and enhance quality. “We’re an independent vineyard with 40 clients, so we can custom-farm blocks to the differing needs of each winemaker,” Hammell notes. This means there can be striking variations in the style of Bien Nacido wines, depending on the winemaker. Still, Miller says he detects a consensus: “We’ve had big success with the Chardonnays, which show intense tropical fruit characteristics.” In order for those qualities to shine, winemakers are likely using less wood and more stainless steel in the process.

But it’s not the Chardonnay that has made Bien Nacido famous; rather, it’s the elegant Pinot Noirs that spring from the acreage. “They’re very

Burgundian in style,” Miller says, with some of that barnyard character and a basic cherry-berry backbone.” The Pinots made by his clients have earned international acclaim, and Miller is pleased to note that America’s new darling red is coming on strong here, too. “Our Syrahs have become a benchmark for the varietal in this state.”

Bonaccorsi, 2002 Syrah, Bien Nacido Vineyard, Santa Maria Valley - \$45: Ripe and assertive, but balance with pure flavors of huckleberry and black currant. Smooth, creamy mouth-feel. Sturdy structure of acid and tannin. Fermented with 8 percent viognier.
Score: 90

Qupe, 2000 Chardonnay Reserve, Bien Nacido, Santa Maria Valley - \$25: A richly flavored wine with a smooth, dense mouth-feel. Tropical fruit flavors of orange along with hints of mango and lime; caramel and nutmeg notes emerge on the long finish. The acid and fruit are nicely balanced.
Score: 91