

San Francisco Chronicle – Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir Recommendations

Jon Bonné Sunday, September 5, 2010

Some years are easy ones, but 2008 wasn't really one of those for the Pinot posse in Santa Barbara County.

The region features a combination of outstanding Pinot areas, including Santa Maria Valley - home to the defining Bien Nacido Vineyards - as well as the Sta. Rita Hills to the south, with its usually stable growing conditions.

This particular vintage, though, got a run of extreme high heat - Santa Maria posted a record high in June - plus doses of frost and smoke and pollution from wildfires, which partially blocked sunlight.

And yet we found plenty to enjoy from 2008. For this panel I was joined by restaurant consultant and wine buyer Frank Klein, and Suzanne McKee of the San Francisco Wine Trading Co.

These are more low-key wines, in many cases, than the usual expressions, and some slow ripening seemed to prompt a decision to let the fruit show itself with a bit less weight than often is the case. But especially in the region's top sites, there were wines that offered tremendous potential.

Bien Nacido Vineyards in Santa Maria Valley did particularly well. That's no surprise, because if there's anyone experienced to handle a tricky year, it's the Miller family, which owns it. But several Sta. Rita sites showed more delicate fruit than the robust 2007s, and that extra bit of brightness helped bring them back to a more classic Pinot expression.

So if the discussion over the 2008s is likely to continue for a while, in Santa Barbara it is a vintage where the potential for delicate, deft Pinot was there. And as Pinot slowly retrenches toward the nuance that so captivates its loyal fans, these are wines that show the nuance can most definitely still be found.

2008 Alma Rosa La Encantada Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$43): *Richard Sanford, one of Santa Barbara's wine pioneers (Sanford & Benedict), continues to set a standard for the region with his Alma Rosa label. His 2008s, made by Christian Roguenant, are wonderfully nuanced, and this gorgeous estate bottling is deeply aromatic and mineral-edged, with tobacco and nutmeg, and a balance of delicate dark blue fruit and tangy wild strawberry. The more accessible, raspberry-inflected **Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir** (\$32) takes nearly as subtle an approach.*

