

## Taking a fresh look at Santa Maria Valley pinot

laurie daniel  
 wine

SANTA MARIA — Although the Santa Maria Valley was the first appellation in Santa Barbara County to gain federal recognition (1981), it's been eclipsed in recent years among pinot noir aficionados by Sta. Rita Hills to the south.

It's time for consumers to take a new look at Santa Maria pinot. New plantings and better vineyard practices are resulting in some exciting new wines.

Santa Maria, south of San Luis Obispo in northern Santa Barbara County, has been overshadowed, at least in part, because of fashion: Sta. Rita Hills pinots are big, bold and concentrated — and thus, in the eyes of many, of high quality — while Santa Maria versions were more delicate and elegant — traits some regard as wimpy and inferior.

I take exception to the notion that the wines necessarily were inferior. Bigger isn't always better, especially in the case of pinot noir. Still, there was room for improvement.

When the early vineyards were planted — Nielson Vineyard, planted in the mid-'60s, was the first commercial vineyard in Santa Barbara County — there weren't many clones, or sub-types, of pinot noir available. Vines were planted with wide spacing and left to sprawl. The cold climate was right for pinot noir, but the clones and viticulture didn't always produce the best quality. Even fairly recent books about California wine have complained of a herbaceous, even vegetal, quality to Santa Maria Valley pinot noir.

The area "had the potential to be good," says Chris Hammell, vineyard manager for the famed Bien Nacido Vineyard. "We know that now."

The picture began changing in the mid- to late 1990s. New vineyards were planted with the newer pinot clones developed in France. Vines were planted closer together, and rows were oriented and trellised for better sun exposure. Some

older vineyards also began to undergo replanting.

At Bien Nacido, first planted in the early '70s, a new block was planted in the mid-1990s for Au Bon Climat winemaker Jim Clendenen, using new clones, closer spacing and a steeper site. "That's when Bien Nacido started modernizing," Hammell says. In older vineyard blocks at Bien Nacido, the trellising was changed and new rows were planted between old ones — known as interplanting — which resulted in tighter spacing.

One reason some people may look askance at the Santa Maria Valley is that it's home to some very large vineyards, rather than the tiny parcels that are the norm in some appellations. Bien Nacido, for example, is nearly 900 acres. Cambria, owned by the Jackson family (as in Jess Jackson of Kendall-Jackson), is nearly 1,600 acres; Jackson also bought neighboring Byron, with its 200-plus acres of vines, in 2006. There are some small plantings, but even many of the newer vineyards, such as Solomon Hills (owned by the Millers, who also own Bien Nacido) and Dierberg, are in the 100- to 300-acre range.

But upgrades are under way nearly everywhere. As at Bien Nacido, new vineyard blocks have been planted at Cambria, and changes have been made in older sections. Cambria winemaker Denise Shurtleff, while conceding that such statements have become clichés, says, "Pinot's got to be made in the vineyard."

The **2005 Cambria Julia's Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$20)** is evidence of the changes. In previous vintages, it was always a pleasant wine, but the 2005 really shines with its spicy cherry and strawberry flavors and firm structure. At that price, it's also a tremendous value.

Gary Burk, who makes pinot from his family's vineyard under the Costa de Oro label, says part of the change in Santa Maria pinot



can be attributed to picking the grapes riper. "Everyone is picking riper than they were 10 years ago," he says. But he adds that some vintners realized they may have pushed ripeness too far and are re-assessing. "People are pulling back and finding where the sweet spot is."

Burk's **2005 Costa de Oro Reserva Oro Rojo Pinot Noir (\$50)** finds that sweet spot, with its spicy cherry and strawberry flavors, good structure and supple texture. His standard bottling of **2005 Costa de Oro (\$27)** has a bit more of a tannic edge and notes of white pepper.

The Cambria and Costa de Oro wines were among about three dozen Santa Maria pinots assembled by the new Santa Maria Valley Wine Country Association for me to taste. Some of the wines suffered from a heavy-handed use of oak; others, especially from 2004, when there was a big heat spike right before harvest, tasted over-ripe. But a couple dozen of the wines were lovely and lively, with a spiciness that's typical of Santa Maria pinot.

"For me, the indicator of Santa Maria is spiciness," regardless of clone or vineyard site, says James Ontiveros, a ninth-generation Californian with broad experience in the area: He's director of sales for Bien Nacido, owner of Native9 Wine and the eight-acre Rancho Ontiveros Vineyard and a partner in Alta Maria Vineyards. His **2005 Native9 Rancho Ontiveros Pinot Noir (\$52)** is built to age, with bright, spicy cherry flavors.

A few of the wines I tasted are sold out, and a couple are sold primarily through mailing lists. But here are some of the highlights among the wines that should be

available:

From Au Bon Climat, one of Santa Maria's best-known wineries, the **2005 La Bauge Au-dessus Pinot Noir (\$30)** has lots of upfront cherry fruit, then the tannins build on the finish. The **2004 Au Bon Climat "Le Bon Climat" (\$35)** is ripe yet lively, with spicy cherry and raspberry flavors and firm structure.

The **2005 Rusack Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$32)** is still fairly tight, but with a little time in the glass it offers some pretty cherry and raspberry flavors. Wine-maker John Falcone, who also makes pinot from Sta. Rita Hills, thinks that "the tannin structure tends to be a little friendlier" in Santa Maria.

The **2004 Byron Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$40)** displays lively, bright cherry and raspberry fruit and a supple texture, while the **2005 Foxe Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$32)** is nicely balanced, with supple, spicy cherry flavors. The **2005 Summerland Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$42)** is another pretty wine, with pure, spicy cherry and raspberry flavors and a supple texture. The **2005 Stephen Ross Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$35)** is a little more structured, with spicy cherry and rhu-barb notes.

These wines are a small number of what's available from the Santa Maria Valley. Bien Nacido Vineyard alone sells grapes to more than four dozen wineries, and the appellation is also known for good chardonnay and syrah. But this is clearly an exciting time for Santa Maria Valley pinot noir.

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The Santa Maria Valley is home to some very large vineyards, including Cambria, above, at nearly 1,600 acres.