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Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir recommendations

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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.

2008 Au Bon Climat Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$50): Talk about a classic Santa Barbara matchup: winemaker Jim Clendenen with the historic Sanford &

Benedict site. A smoky cola-edged, nuanced take, with lots of robust dark cherry and dried moss; a mineral edge that lifts the finish. It's opulent, layered Sta. Rita Pinot with a serious pedigree.

2008 Byron Bien Nacido Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$40): Byron turned out a solid lineup for 2008, but Bien Nacido particularly left an impression. A darker, loamier profile, with a subtle musk amid generous, rich plum and blackberry fruit. That deeper, earth-driven style could use some time to reach its full potential, but it's a compelling expression.

2008 Dragonette Cellars Cargasacchi-Jalama Vineyard Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir (\$38): This young label founded by Steve and John Dragonette and Brandon Sparks-Gillis has access to some of Santa Barbara's best vineyards, including this colder site southwest of the Sta. Rita Hills. Landing at just 13.3 percent alcohol and aged in neutral oak, it's impressively nuanced, with roasted orange highlights and a warm mace spice and musk, plus radiant raspberry and cherry. Tight-knit structure, with lots of dense fruit, but a refinement to the tannins.

2008 Lafond Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$27): Bruce McGuire mixed estate grapes with fruit from the Arita Hills and Kick On Ranch sites for this accessible Sta. Rita cuvee. The nose has an earthy presence, with damp soil and nutmeg that accent tangy strawberry fruit. The vibrancy isn't all red fruit, though, with some black-fruit flavors adding a core of weight.

2008 Longoria Rancho Santa Rosa Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$45): Rick Longoria found a terrific tension in this benchmark Sta. Rita site, with scents that are slightly sanguine and tightly wound. It's a weightier style, with lift and delicacy from an interplay of bright, brilliant strawberry and deeper huckleberry jam flavors.

2008 Native 9 Vineyards Rancho Ontiveros Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$55): James Ontiveros planted his own vineyard on land once owned by his ancestors in the Mexican land-grant days. He sells fruit to several top Pinot names, but his own estate effort is heady and spicy, made with whole clusters in 60 percent new oak. It's weighted by wood tones and a deep, earthy extract, matched by forest floor and dried ferns bringing an edge to dark cherry and bramble fruit. Serious stuff.

2008 Roessler Sanford and Benedict Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$54): Another terrific take on this classic site from Roger Roessler's Sonoma-based label. Subdued, perfumed with a dried-marjoram edge and loamy strawberry fruit underneath. Seamless and well hewed, with finessed tannin and an innate brightness that feels natural. Worth giving it a couple years in the bottle.

2008 Rusack Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$36): Winemaker John Falcone sourced this from two Santa Maria sites, and it's a well-done take. Wound up and edgy, with bright mineral and a thyme and orange edge to the lively cherry. Vivacious and refreshing.

2008 Stephen Ross Bien Nacido Vineyards Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$38): Winemaker Steve Dooley got a ripe, powerful, darker-flavored effort out of Bien Nacido this year, one that could use a year or two in the bottle. As it opens, a subtle bramble fruit comes out, with mint and musk and wet mushroom aromas to anchor it.