

That Cool Hillside Breeze

"UP UNTIL SEVEN OR EIGHT YEARS AGO," says Bob Lindquist, winemaker at Central Coast syrah specialist Qupé, "Bien Nacido was the coolest place on the planet growing syrah." He's quick to admit that there's no hard evidence for this, but some day in July take a trip down to Bien Nacido Vineyard, 900 acres in Santa Barbara County, and you're likely to agree — and wish you'd brought a sweater.

Thanks to the fog and chilly breezes coming off the ocean, mid-summer temperatures in this part of California generally hover somewhere between 55° and 75° F. No warmer. Which means that grapes take a long time to ripen. The only reason you can grow fruit at all down here is the region's long, warm fall that pushes harvest into November. Such conditions usually suit chardonnay and pinot noir, but while those two varieties account for over 500 acres in Bien Nacido, syrah has found a home here, too: an especially good one in a 20-acre hillside bowl on the eastern side of the vineyard. This is where Bob Lindquist picks syrah for his Bien Nacido Hillside Reserve bottling, one of three Central Coast syrahs from Qupé.

Most California syrah comes from warm places like eastern Paso Robles, Napa or the Central Valley, where warm temperatures can cause weed-like growth, over-production and a wine that can be big, dumb, tannic and simple. Lindquist's efforts (followed by producers such as Alban, Ojai and others) convinced growers and winemakers that a different style of Californian syrah was possible, that it would come from cool vineyards, that it would hold some of the aromatic spiciness of Côte Rôtie.

Over the centuries the Bien Nacido Hillside plot has lost much of its topsoil down the slope. The

leftover gravelly clay loam is nutrient-poor, not good for much — except syrah vines. "Nothing really grew there before except range grasses," says Lindquist. "You know how California hills have blank patches and patches with shrubbery? This was a blank patch." In other words, the ground provides the level of stress the syrah vines need to keep their growth under control. The cold helps keep growth down too, until the fall, when temperatures here inch a step or two higher than in the rest of Bien Nacido, a big help when Lindquist and others are waiting anxiously, weeks after Napa and Sonoma have finished, for the fruit to ripen up.



BIEN NACIDO HILLSIDE

Qupé Bien Nacido Hillside Estate Syrah: 1999, 1998, 1997

We compared three vintages of Qupé Hillside Reserve Syrah, **1997**, **1998** and **1999**, years that show Bien Nacido in its extremes of warm and cold. **1997** was the warm year, and the wine explodes with lovely, ripe, juicy fruit, the oak (60 to 70 percent new French barrels) layering on dark chocolate and coffee bean notes. It's a big, sexy wine, Californian in character and easy to love, though not particularly complex.

1998 was made in a rainy year (an El Niño year) with temperatures fluctuating between cold and hot. The fruit here is concentrated, dark and juicy with the flavor of ripe plums. The acidity left over from the cooler year yields a brighter, fresher quality than the **1997**, which seems jammy and huge by comparison.

More than either of these two, however, the **1999** shows the



potential of cool climate syrah. Lindquist picked the fruit in '99 on November 18th, the latest he's ever harvested; the yields were down to 2.2 tons/acre (average is in the upper threes) and the sugars were low. But the wine that has emerged from this inauspicious start is floral and fragrant, with delicate flavors of lilac and rose water. There's also the weight of earth in the '99, a reminder that Bien Nacido syrah is not pure, simple fruit. If it sounds light, it isn't. Though this is not a

syrah that wishes it were cabernet or zin, though it's not strapped with tannin and roasting with alcohol, the wine has length, the flavors refreshing in your mouth, lifted by the acidity. There's balance here, and the brightness of the coast, the vibrancy of fruit on a sea breeze.