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James Ontiveros and Paul Wilkins

By Jon Bonné

CHRONICLE WINE EDITOR

How could you pick out James Ontiveros during his college days?

"I was the guy coming to class filthy from working in my vineyard," he replies.

Ontiveros had decided to plant Pinot Noir on his family's ranch outside Santa Maria while a sophomore in college, but his roots on the Central Coast are as deep as they come. He's a ninth-generation Californian; his family received one of the early land grants, property that now houses such Santa Barbara County vineyards as Bien Nacido and Riverbench.

His family owned cattle, so Ontiveros signed up for animal science at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. But farming seemed like a better bet, so he switched to crop and fruit sciences.

But what to grow? The answer was staring him in the face. "From our ranch," he says, "you basically have a panoramic view looking out into all these famous vineyards."

Meantime, he met another fruit-science major. Paul Wilkins had come to Cal Poly to escape Tulare County, where his father farmed 300 acres of crops. Cal Poly didn't offer wine studies then, but both joined a small club which offered students the chance to visit nearby wineries.

"We were a very small group of wine geeks back in the day when being a wine geek wasn't really cool," Wilkins says.

Both started on their wine careers even before graduation. While developing his land, Ontiveros handled grower relations for Kendall-Jackson. Wilkins landed a 1996 internship as the second employee of John Alban, the Rhône



pioneer in Edna Valley; soon Alban made him assistant winemaker.

Ontiveros graduated and moved north to do grower relations for Gallo. But after a family crisis in 2001 he moved back south, where his neighbors, the Miller family - owners of Bien Nacido - hired him as director of sales and marketing, which remains his day job.

By 2005, Wilkins was ready to move on from Alban and found consulting clients; soon his old college pal called, hoping Wilkins would make the Pinot from his 8-acre site - along with Alta Maria, a project using bought fruit.

Wilkins paid a visit. Ontiveros' vineyard, with its stressed, densely planted vines, made clear the two were of like minds about how to farm. Soon Ontiveros switched his strategy for planting, choosing samples of Old California Pinot vines like Mt. Eden and Swan from the nearby Byron property.

"There's a saying: A fisherman can spot another fisherman," Ontiveros says.

Native⁹, now in its seventh vintage, remains a showcase, but the duo has grown fonder of the Alta Maria project, which harnesses Wilkins' cellar skills (he also has a Rhône-focused label, Autonom)

and Ontiveros' local contacts from his work for Bien Nacido.

"I am not a value guy," Ontiveros says. "What makes me super proud after starting off saying,

'I'm not a value shopper' is saying, 'I can't think of a better \$25 bottle of Pinot Noir in the world.'"

And this matchup has the talent to make it so.

From the notebook

2008 Alta Maria Vineyards Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$25): This blend from multiple Santa Maria sites shows how good Ontiveros is at selecting fruit, and how good Wilkins is at expressing it. Brightly engaging and irresistible, a perfect counterpoint to Native9, with a woody edge to dusky strawberry.

2008 Native9 Rancho Ontiveros Vineyards Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$25): This is big, heady stuff - a dense, spicy, ever-shifting pile of whole cluster fruit, full of dried porcini, stone, marjoram, rich black cherry and blackberry. Amazing potential.

Names: James Ontiveros and Paul Wilkins

Ages: 37,36

What they do: Make top Santa Barbara Pinot Noir under the Native9 and Alta Maria labels.

Backstories: Ontiveros: Grower relations for Gallo and Kendall-Jackson white planting his own vineyard, then working for Bien Nacido's Miller family. Wilkins: Assistant winemaker at Alban Vineyards, then several consulting projects.

Glasses after work: Ontiveros: "Jacquesson Champagne, then a bottle of Cameron Hughes Lot 200." Wilkins: "A vodka martini, no vermouth, two olives."

Quotes: Ontiveros: "A guy who doesn't know what he's doing can ruin a great site. I know guys who we could drop in the middle of Montrachet and they'd produce crap." Wilkins: "I really got to learn about wine and winemaking by tasting and doing."