

Going off on a tangent with a new line of alternative whites

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Going off on a tangent with a new line of alternative whites The Niven family has long been a fixture on the Central Coast's wine scene. They were among the first to specifically identify the east-west running Edna Valley as a superior place to grow top-quality varietals. The cool climate at the Nivens' Paragon Vineyard (planted in 1973), influenced by the Pacific Ocean only four miles away, is much like Santa Barbara County just to the south. The soils on the flatlands are well draining Diablo series clay, while the hillsides consist of sandy loam and volcanic rock.

The Paragon Vineyard, now comprised of 872 acres, is well known throughout California with some of the grapes contracted to top quality winemakers. But a lot of those grapes are now destined for their brand new label, tangent (that's tangent with small t), strictly devoted to alternative white wines. You have probably previously tasted the Nivens' handiwork, from their Edna Valley Vineyards (co-venture with Chalone) as well as their premium label, Baileyana.

Burgundian-born winemaker Christian Roguenant heads up the winemaking team at both tangent and Baileyana; in 1999, he oversaw design and construction of the Nivens' new Baileyana winery and custom crush facility. Many locals remember him for the dozen years he made sparkling wines at Maison Deutz and Laetitia.

Mr. Roguenant's winemaking approach at tangent is to harvest ripe grapes, stainless steel ferment them at cool temps without any secondary malolactic fermentation, not allow the wines to see the inside of an oak barrel and bottle them young. The idea is to preserve the freshness and lively acidity of the wines to reflect their pure varietal character, which will marry very naturally with food.

To top it off, they all come in screw capped bottles. It's a smart thought and it really works well with these varietals:

- **2005 tangent Sauvignon Blanc, Paragon Vineyard** (\$13): Pear, pineapple and a shade of gooseberry are the enticing aromatics, though they're not anywhere near the over the edge style of the popular New Zealand sauvignon blancs. Good, clean crisp mouth feel with flavors of pear, apple, pineapple and a seasoning of that gooseberry marker again. It's a well balanced wine that also shows tracking notes of new mown grass and minerals. A fine cut of acidity on the finish as well as a zingy sort of tanginess leaves things on an upbeat ending.

• **2005 tangent Pinot Gris, Paragon Vineyard** (\$17): Minerals and white flowers (acacia) on the nose with a lot of pine resin (in a good way!). Both tropical and stone fruit are clearly delineated flavors, along with pear in the background. Again, the wine is fresh, pure and crisp but an intriguing honeyed clover character also comes into play; it particularly echoes on the finish and you realize something more flavorfully complex is coming into play rather than simple white wine. Very juicy in the mouth, it also has a bit of that Alsatian style of pleasant bitterness on the end. Deep dish and seriously delicious stuff.

• **2005 tangent Pinot Blanc, Laetitia Vineyard** (\$17): Very fragrant and inviting nose of ripe pear and apple, which is so typical of the varietal. On the palate, it's fresh, crisp, vibrant and refreshing. Pear and apple again, as well as a touch of brown baking spices, are the flavors that are well rounded in the mouth. At the same time it has a soft core of the fruit that makes it very easy to drink. Indeed, on the finish you discover how rich the wine is: it has a persistence of flavors that resound long after you've swallowed. So it's not just all pretty fruit; this one has staying power and minerality that will bring you back for another sip.

• **2005 tangent Albarino, Jack Ranch Vineyard** (\$17): I've recommended this wine in a previous column on the rise in popularity of albarino. To reiterate, this albarino is easy to like, with honeyed tangerine and stone fruit aromatics. Nothing gets in the way of the fruit flavors: peach, nectarine and tangerine blossom are apparent, along with a hint of grapefruit and banana.

It's all held together by a robust honeyed character. This wine is on par with most Spanish producers' "reserve" albarino bottlings, so the price of the tangent albarino is a bargain.

• **2005 tangent Ecclestone, San Luis Obispo County** (\$20): Ecclestone is a proprietary white wine blend that includes (in descending percentage order) viognier, pinot gris, pinot blanc, riesling, muscat canelli and albarino. The epitome of synergy, this is the entire portfolio of tangent's alternative white grapes, all rolled in to one bottle. The blend, which can change from year to year, depending on Mother Nature and what's available, is Mr. Roguenant's idea of what a delicious blended wine should be. Aromatics include orange rind, tangerine, citrus, and orange blossom, while the flavors hit softly in the mouth but with a certain richness, although finishing with the tangent's trademark crisp, clean acidity. Orange and tangerine blossom flavors roll across the palate with mineral undertones, along with a soupçon of apricot and lychee nuts.

Suffice it to say, something is going on here that is way more than the sum of its parts, and that includes its many facets of flavor.

Wine expert Dennis Schaefer's column appears every other week in the Food section. E-mail: life@newspress.com.