

# Good Birth from Great Earth

By Judy Willis

## Bien Nacido Vineyard

I arrived almost an hour late for my appointment at Bien Nacido Vineyards. It was the busiest time of the year at the vineyard, just two days before harvest, and **Nicholas Miller** had driven up to meet with us. Yet as I muttered prolific apologies, Nicholas disarmed me with a smile and said, “No problem, we’re on Santa Maria time.” From that moment I relaxed in the embrace of this special place, so rich in history, and experienced the ambiance of this unique and revered vineyard that provides grapes for many of the Central Coast’s very best wines.

Nicholas is the second of **Steve Miller’s** two sons, making him the fifth generation in his family to be involved in Californian agriculture. During high school and college, he spent several summers working with the family business. Upon graduating from Bowdin College, Nicholas took a position with a marketing consulting firm in Boston before finally returning to California to work fulltime for the family business in 2004.

But, I’m getting ahead of the story, which actually traces the roots of the vineyard back to 1837 when Juan Bautista Alvarado made a Spanish land grant of some two square leagues to Tomas Olivera, then Gobernador of Alta California. This grant covered Bien Nacido Vineyards’ nearly 9,000 acres ranging upward to the San Rafael Mountains from the Santa Maria Mesa, which bordered the Sisquoc and Cuyama Rivers. The ranch was generously watered by Tepusquet Creek, so called by the Chumash Indians to whom it meant, "fishing for trout." Thomas Olivera sold Rancho Tepusquet in 1855 to his son-in-law Don Juan Pacifico Ontiveros and daughter Martina. Don Juan Pacifico Ontiveros started construction on an adobe in 1857 and moved to the ranch the following year. He and his wife raised horses, cattle, sheep, several grain

crops, and grapes for the production of wine. During subsequent years, his heirs divided the property until only about fourteen hundred acres remained surrounding the **Ontiveros Adobe**.

In 1969, the Millers, a fifth generation California farming family, purchased the property along with an adjacent parcel which had been part of the original land grant, and reunited the two as Rancho Tepusquet, comprising over two thousand acres. The original adobe remains as one of the few privately maintained adobes in California. Having been restored two years ago, it is a true treasure of California history that is used for special events and charitable fundraisers, such as a recent one for Santa Maria's hospital.

In the early 1970's, it became clear to the Millers that the soils and climate were ideal for growing grapes so Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Merlot were planted by Nicholas's uncle and father, Steve. While the ranch itself had always been called "Rancho Tepusquet" the Millers selected the name "Bien Nacido (or "well-born") Vineyards of Rancho Tepusquet" for the vineyard operation.

As Bien Nacido Vineyards has grown to over 900 acres, of which over 300 acres are planted to Chardonnay, over 250 to Pinot Noir, and a number of acres each to Pinot Blanc, Syrah, and Merlot it has continued to experiment and "give back" to the wine business. Since 1992, experimental plantings of Pinot Gris, Barbera, Rousanne, Nebiollo, Viognier, Petite Verdot, Tocai and Refosco, as well as new clones of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Syrah, and Merlot, have been added.

Significant events in California's winemaking history took place at Bien Nacido. In 1992, winemaker **Chris Whitcraft** of Whitcraft Wines, who was one of the early producers of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Bien Nacido grapes, began to label the front of his bottles not only with the name of the vineyard, but also with the specific block of rows from which the grapes came, "I was the first to do this with my Whitcraft Bien Nacido Q Block. I wanted to have a record of the wine characteristics of the different grape clones planted in the blocks in case I, or anyone else, wanted to plant either of them in the future. It turned out that I liked the individual qualities in both the N and Q blocks, so I have kept them as separate Pinots." What does Chris say characterizes Bien Nacido? "As well as Bien Nacido has done year after year, they never stop trying to do better."

As we walked the vineyards admiring the well-tended vines Nicholas explained, “We are a series of individual vineyards that we farm to the needs of each winemaker. They can determine how much leaf pruning and crop drop suits their style and we’ll follow their instructions. By charging for grapes by the acre, rather than by the ton, the winemakers can determine how much crop they want to get from their blocks. We try to make improvements as the science of vineyard farming grows, such as getting lights to do night harvests of the grapes to avoid the heat of the day and maintain their structure. With each of these developments we have tried to help further the progress of the Santa Maria wine-growing region while increasing the recognition and role of Bien Nacido Vineyard. It is a symbiotic relationship that has been rewarding for all involved.”

There are three winemaking facilities on the property, one of which is leased to **Bob Lindquist** of **Qupe Winery** and **Jim Clendenen** of **Au Bon Climat Winery**, another to **Jeff Fink** and **Bill Cates** of **Tantara Winery**, and the newest to **Greg Linn** of **Ambullneo Vineyards**. In addition to these winemakers, Bien Nacido and the two other premium Miller family vineyards, Solomon Hills and French Camp, sell grapes to select winemakers including **Whitcraft, Hitching Post, Foxen, Longoria, Ojai Vineyards, Jaffurs, Gary Farrell, Sine Qua Non, Stephen Ross, Landmark, Villa Mt. Eden** and **Lane Tanner**

You may notice that some wine bottles are single vineyard or “vineyard designate” meaning that the name of the vineyard is featured on the front label above or below the name of the wine. When a winemaker signs a contract to purchase fruit from Bien Nacido or Solomon Hills Vineyard they are not permitted to put the vineyard name on the label until the wine is approved by the Millers or **James Ontiveros**, a descendent of the historic Ontiveros family who is Director of Sales and Marketing for all three Miller Family Vineyards. Their quality evaluations insure the excellence of wines that bear their vineyard designation.

Just what is it about this vineyard, located off Santa Maria Mesa Road, in the Santa Maria appellation that has made it one of the most prestigious and best-known vineyards in the appellation - a region that has become acknowledged as a producer of world class wines? It is one of the coolest wine-growing regions in the state resulting in a long growing season that allows for fully developed flavors and bright acidity in the

grapes. I was able to experience the climatic influences by spending the night in a house in the middle of the vineyard. I was able to walk through the cooling morning fog before the mid morning summer sun broke through. As the day wore on and temperatures inland reached the 100 degree plus mark, the vineyard high peaked out in the low 80's and the early afternoon cooling breezes that blow in from the Pacific provided a perfect climate for Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Syrah and several other Rhône varieties of grapes which thrive with the cooler temperatures and longer hang time on the vines.

Then there is the factor of rain. As explained by James Ontiveros, "This is a marine-influenced desert off the ocean because the rainfall drops on the mountains on either side of our valley. If Santa Maria or Santa Barbara get thirty inches of rain, we get twelve. That, plus the cooler temperatures make us a true region one microclimate." Finally, the terrain is mostly sand, chalk, and loam marine basin that was left behind when ocean floor once reached out that far, providing the great drainage that produces phenomenal fruit-bearing vines with intensely flavored and structured grapes.

As we continued our tour in the ranch truck Nicholas pointed out the Cuyama River on property that is the boundary between Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties. We passed hillsides planted with avocado trees, stunning flower fields in multicolored bloom, and even open areas where more vines could be planted. I naturally asked Nicholas if further growth was planned and he responded with the wisdom that has brought Bien Nacido its well-deserved reputation, "We want to stay small enough to be family owned and managed – to always know what is going on and be responsive to the needs of the winemakers who purchase our fruit. We love what we do as growers and want to continue to enjoy it on the scale we know will let us maintain the personal connections with the earth and farming that our family has had for five generations."

## **The Wisdom of Solomon Hills**

As the morning fog was still blanketing the newest Miller Vineyard, Solomon Hills, James Ontiveros added his wisdom, experience, and his inherent ancestral love of this land to my appreciation of the vineyard. James, a graduate of California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, is a native of the Santa Maria Valley. He is a descendant of the pioneering family that once owned the land grant on which Bien Nacido Vineyard is located. Before joining the Miller Family operation in November of 2001, he was the Southern Sonoma Manager of Vineyard Operations for Gallo of Sonoma, in the Russian River and Sonoma Coast appellations.

According to James, "I couldn't have dreamed up a better fit in an organization - our goals, philosophies, and an amazing history of two old California families have brought me back to my roots in more ways than one. I couldn't be in a better situation!"

At dinner, the evening before at **Chef Rick's** I had the opportunity to taste two outstanding wines from this vineyard. The 2003 **Ambullneo Chardonnay** had the richness of texture and finesse of flavor one finds in a top Burgundy (It's predecessor from 2002 rated a 93 from Robert Parker and the 2003 Solomon Hills rated a 95). The Solomon Hills Pinot Noir selected by Nicholas to accompany our entrees is also one to seek out. It is crafted by **Jeff Wilkes**, a former Bien Nacido vintner, and labeled as **J. Wilkes Pinot Noir**. This 2003 vintage was lush, layered, and sensuous. Its only flaw is that only 125 cases produced. We can only hope that Jeff's long time connection to the Miller family will increase his allotment of these grapes upon which to work his mastery.

As James drove us up to a hillside with a magnificent view of the vineyard below he pointed out the two separate 50-acre sections of this vineyard planted in 1999 in the very westernmost and coolest corner of the valley. From that vantage I was able to comprehend the vision of James and Nicholas that this region of Santa Maria could well become its own visitor destination. It already has its unique mezzoclimate and connects with the Foxen wine trail as well as linking with other vineyard tasting rooms such as Byron and Cambria.

After experiencing the combination of the "terroir" of Bien Nacido and Solomon Hills Vineyards, the people who manage it, and the symbiotic relationships they have developed with their winemakers I now understand what makes these vineyards and the Santa Maria region unique in the wine industry. The Millers do live up to their mission statement, “ To set the standard for ultra-premium, cool-climate winegrape production in California.”