

CABBAGE & KALE TO WORLD-CLASS GRAPES

By W. Blake Gray

A couple months ago, the mainstream media world freaked out about a Morgan Stanley report that a global wine shortage is looming.

Thanks to a similar report 40 years ago, we now have one of the best vineyards in California.

In 1973, Bank of America issued a report showing that young people were more interested in wine than their parents, and that would only increase as they got older. Sound familiar?

At the time, fine wines in California came almost exclusively from Napa Valley. The bulk of wine made in the Golden State came from the reliably hot San Joaquin Valley. Sonoma County had some important vineyards and old wineries, and because land was cheap, Monterey County was heavily planted to grapes that would turn out to be poorly chosen. From there to the Mexican border, there were few vineyards.

Stephen Miller and his brother Bob were already fourth-generation farmers in Santa Barbara County; their great-grandfather had come to California from England in the 1870s to buy a cattle ranch.

In 1968, the family pooled its resources to buy a big swath of land sheltered by mountains in cool Santa Maria Valley, which even today is planted with huge fields of broccoli and kale and smells strongly of both in November, even with your car windows rolled up. It's still peaceful farm country, and in the morning, sunlight pours down like a spotlight on some of the hilltops, like God is taking a look at the grapevines.

When they bought it, the Millers intended to plant vegetables like their neighbors. But then came this Bank of America report, which, Stephen Miller recalled, "said there'd never be enough grapes to meet American demands." Never.

Today, the idea to plant grapes in a hilly, cool area surrounded by broccoli doesn't sound strange. But back then, American wineries mostly followed the worries of their French forebears: are these grapes going to ripen? That's why the flat fields in the center of Napa Valley were so prized. The Millers owned some land in Paso Robles, also not an area with many grapevines planted, but that was warmer so it made sense.

Bien Nacido vineyard, that was a gamble. There was one vineyard three miles west, and other than that, no grapevines for miles around. No road map for what grapes to plant, and no market for them either.

"In this ebullient time, there was a belief that you could grow anything anywhere with the same template," Miller says. They planted eight varieties at first, including plenty of Cabernet, because that's what everyone said was the future signature grape of California. That lasted three vintages. Fortunately, they also planted Chardonnay, which is still one of Bien Nacido's best grapes.

The Millers quickly learned that growing great grapes in the middle of nowhere wasn't enough of a business plan, and it wouldn't do them any good for their grapes to simply disappear into giant tanks of blended California red wine.

"In years of shortage or need, Napa wineries were eager to buy fruit," Miller says. "In other years, they really weren't interested in the Central Coast. We decided we needed to cultivate a local industry. We wanted to work with winemakers who had talent, but we knew that they weren't coming in with sacks of cash."

The Millers built a custom-crush facility and began a program they still have to this day: They'll sell grapes to you only if they think you can make good wine. They interview winemakers; ask them to bring bottles they've already made; sit down for dinner, in their home, and talk about wine.

I've had dinner with the Millers. They are such a delightful family that if they were on television, people would complain that there isn't enough strife. Stephen Miller is a gentleman who speaks in complete, polite sentences. When he wants to say something about Napa Valley that might be considered even mildly insulting, he backs off and says, "Some regions to the north." His son Nicholas is similar: clean-cut and clean-looking, interested in world wine culture, never negative. Kids run around, either young Millers or those of their vineyard manager Chris Hammell, but there never seem to be fights. Put it this way: You might never hear them using curse words (I haven't), but if you should happen to let some fly, that's OK.

The Millers are well-known to everyone who makes wine in Santa Barbara County, which in 1973 was a group you could fit in a van. The custom-crush facility wasn't enough for them to show the world how good their grapes could be; They needed people who were there all the time.

Jim Clendenen and Bob Lindquist were working at another island of winemaking, Zaca Mesa, about 30 miles southwest, but they were restless to start their own projects. They couldn't afford to build a winery, so the Millers built one for them. Clendenen founded Au Bon Climat; Lindquist founded Qupé. Those two wineries, along with Sanford, basically put Santa Barbara County on the world's wine map.

"We built (the winery) because we believed in them," Miller says. "We thought they

were going to be very important for the Central Coast. We spent more than we anticipated but enough for them to accomplish their artistry. We thought it was small. They were complaining that it was too large. We told them, the cost per square footage, we need it to be at least this big. They said, we'll never ever fill this building up.

"A year and a half later, they said, 'Would you consider expanding it?' I find having lunch with Bob and Jim can be expensive."

Clendenen wanted Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but Lindquist was very excited about the possibilities of cool-climate Syrah, which -- hard as this is to believe now -- barely existed anywhere in the world at that time. In fact, it's still true today: Bien Nacido ranks as the coolest Region 1 on the Winkler scale of annual degree days, along with Champagne and Willamette Valley, Oregon; There just isn't much Syrah in these places. The Rhone Valley, Syrah's home, is Region 3.

"Bob (Lindquist) had a vision," Miller says. "He's always been absolutely true to his vision."

Every new wine region creates its own kind of wine, a point people don't always grasp. Oregon Pinot Noir doesn't have to be Burgundy; We now have a new kind of Pinot Noir. But with Qupé Bien Nacido Syrah, it's even more striking. The long, cool growing season, safe from damaging fall rains, allows an expression of Syrah that just wasn't possible before. Sure, it can taste of ripe fruit, but there's plenty of freshness and a mouthfeel that's not rich, but precise. And it's consistent, year after year. Same with Au Bon Climat's Chardonnay. You taste these wines today and wonder why anyone ever doubted it would work. But 40 years ago, it was cabbage and kale.

This autumn saw the 40th anniversary of Bien Nacido Vineyards. Bob Miller died in 2004, but Stephen is still involved in the business, and still loves to meet young winemakers with more ambition than cash. Search on Wine Searcher for "Bien Nacido" and you see not just the familiar winery names, but people who may have bought just a few rows of grapes. There's a fine Pinot Blanc from J. Wilkes, an elegant Pinot Noir from Longoria, a potent Syrah from Paul Lato and a more delicate one from Jaffurs. The variety is so great, the winemaker's signature so important, that it's hard to get a grip on what terroir of Bien Nacido Vineyard tastes like.

So here's a suggestion: Bien Nacido Vineyard tastes like ambition, and consistency, and geniality. And sometimes ripe blackberries with plenty of acidity.