



SPOTLIGHT: BIEN NACIDO VINEYARD'S NICHOLAS MILLER

By Steve Heimoff, December 7, 2012

Bien Nacido is an awfully nice place to be in December, a time of the year when most of the rest of the country is in the deep freeze. I've been here when there was frost on the bare vines, and the wind off the sea—just miles away—was bitter. But that's rare.

Today—yesterday, as you read this—as the sun sets in the west, the temperature is close to seventy-five. If you've ever visited this part of the Santa Maria Valley, you know how the hills (I think they're an extension of the San Gabriel Mountains) bunch up on the east side, but the valley itself is a broad, open plain, with nothing to keep the maritime influence from blowing in from the Pacific. That is, of course, what makes it such a cool place (in both senses of the word), ideal for varieties like Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah.

It's a fine vineyard, Bien Nacido, one of California's best. I looked up all my reviews over the years from wines with a Bien Nacido Vineyard designate on the label, and found about 300. The scores are quite high. About half are above 90 points, an astonishing record.

Young **Nicholas Miller**, whose formal title is VP, sales and marketing, runs the place. His dad, Steve, and uncle Robert planted the first vines in 1973, making them pioneers on this property that traces its roots back to the old Rancho Tepusquet Land Grant [1837].

Now, of course, Bien Nacido is one of the most coveted sources of fruit in California. More than 600 acres are planted to vines, but Nicholas explains that "*the vast majority doesn't go into Bien Nacido Vineyard-[designated] bottlings,*" but is sold off for anonymous inclusion in blends. This is to ensure a strict quality level for anything that bears the vineyard's name. About 45 wineries currently source fruit from the vineyard; over the years, there have been far more. "*There's always some attrition of buyers,*" Nicholas says, "*but we're always looking for up-and-comers, like La Fenetre, Tyler and Chanin.*" Count among those up-and-comers Miller's own Bien Nacido brand, which he started a few years ago. They bottle outstanding Syrah, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and as you might expect, Nicholas has no problem gaining access to the best blocks!

Nicholas inherited that passion of giving younger winemakers a chance from his dad and uncle, who built a small winery for a young Jim Clendenen (Au Bon Climate) and Bob Lindquist (Qupe) to make their wines. Both men are still there, tucked into a small valley on the property. Nicholas judges his family's biggest impact on the Santa Barbara wine scene "*has been to support small boutique winemakers.*" This includes their two custom crush facilities "*to host small artisanal producers to focus on this region.*"

Bien Nacido Vineyard will celebrate the 40th anniversary of its first plantings next year, an event that surely calls for some kind of party. Never content to rest of his laurels, Nicholas is now actively engaged in The Chardonnay Symposium, scheduled for July 19-21, 2013, at which I'll moderate a panel. Nicholas is never content with the status quo; he would like to see Santa Maria Valley and Santa Barbara County recognized as the world-class producing regions they are.