



## **Q&A WITH NICHOLAS MILLER OF BIEN NACIDO VINEYARDS - SANTA BARBARA COUNTY**

by Michael Cervin | December 1, 2011



Bien Nacido is not only the most well-known and respected vineyard on California's Central Coast, but it has the distinction of being one of the major viticultural nurseries in California for certified, varietal budwood. In addition to Bien Nacido, the Millers operate two other vineyard sites, French Camp east of San Luis Obispo, and Solomon Hills in Santa Maria, with well over 2,500 combined acres, as well as two custom crush facilities in Santa Maria and Paso Robles. Bien Nacido was called on of the top 25 vineyards in the world by Wine & Spirits Magazine, and Food & Wine Magazine called them one of the ten best vineyards. The Wine Advocate, Wine Spectator and Wine Enthusiast routinely award over 90 point scores to wines made from Bien Nacido fruit.

### **Bien Nacido is the most widely sourced vineyard on the California Central Coast. Certainly with 800 planted acres it produces a lot of grapes, but beyond that, why is Bien Nacido so sought after?**

Bien Nacido seems to have that magical formula of making wines with a sense of place. Long term customers, such as Jim Clendenon of Au Bon Climat say they can pick a Bien Nacido Pinot Noir out of a blind tasting. Whether it's cool climate Syrah, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir or another varietal, our winery customers enjoy receiving product that is uniquely Bien Nacido.

### **What other vineyards do you operate and how do they differ from Bien Nacido?**

We grow wine grapes on two other ranches: French Camp Vineyards in Paso Robles and the Solomon Hills Vineyards in Santa Maria. French Camp is a larger vineyard with many micro-climates. It has cool areas where Chardonnay thrives, but also warmer spots for Zinfandel and Cabernet. The other vineyard in Santa Maria, Solomon Hills, like Bien Nacido, is strictly a cool climate region where we grow Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Unlike Bien Nacido that has foothills and soils closer to a loam, Solomon Hills is where the Pacific Ocean used to cover the area, retreated, and now we have sand. The soils series are Oceana and Marina.

### **Having the words 'Bien Nacido' on any wine label is in essence like a stamp of approval. Has the success of the vineyard surprised you?**

We are very proud of our customer's wines and their willingness to place the name of our vineyards on them. Currently over 21 wineries source our fruit, from Santa Barbara to Napa.

### **What varieties would you like to grow, that you currently do not grow on your property, and why?**

We custom planted a block of Grenache for the Bien Nacido wine program that we crushed for the first time in 2010. I'm very encouraged by how the wine is tasting in barrel now.

**In addition to owning Bien Nacido, you also own Central Coast Wine Services, a place where many small-lot winemakers have access to professional equipment to make their wines. What is it about the wine industry and winemakers that has caused you to provide so many opportunities for them?**

When my uncle, Bob Miller, and father, Steve Miller, planted Bien Nacido in 1973, the wine industry on the Central Coast was still in its infancy and they ended up selling most of the fruit to the north coast. The Central Coast Wine Services served as an incubator for boutique wineries to encourage the local wine industry. Many of the wineries that started out there have moved out and into their own facilities. With the success of the Central Coast Wine Services we have also built a sister facility in Paso Robles – The Paso Robles Wine Services.

**Explain briefly the history of Bien Nacido and how your family came to purchasing the land. And was the original purchase plan intended for grapes?**

The vineyard traces its roots back to 1837 as a Spanish land grant which covered nearly 9,000 acres. By 1857 the ranch was raising horses, cattle, sheep, several grain crops, and grapes for the production of wine. I am a fifth generation California farmer. Prior to Bien Nacido, my family farmed lemons and avocados in Ventura County (and we still do). In the late 1960's my father and uncle wanted to expand the operations beyond those commodity crops and plant specialty crops which they had more control over marketing. From the beginning their focus was on producing the highest quality grapes they could.

**What prompted you to pursue a career in wine? If not the wine business what path might you have chosen?**

My family has a policy of working elsewhere before working for our family business. I worked for a marketing consulting firm in Boston for a few years before returning to California. That said, agriculture is very important to me and so even if not in the wine business in particular, I would (and am) pursuing a career in other areas of agriculture as well.

**What wine varieties would you like to have worked with, and is there still a chance you'll be producing any wines under your own label?**

I'm still very young in my career, so not looking to close any doors. I'm very happy with focusing on Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Syrah in the Solomon Hills and Bien Nacido wines. However, I do have the advantage of a much broader exposure at my family's custom crush facilities. We make wines from over 30 different varietals at the Central Coast Wine Services and Paso Robles Wine Services.

**There is both criticism and praise for the 100 point rating scale. Some say it empowers consumers, some believe it distorts wine prices, and maybe has actually changed the quality of wines being produced. What are your thoughts on the 100 point rating system?**

The 100 point system seems to be an easy way to communicate with consumer. It's hard for me to speak out against a voluntary system. No one needs to submit their wines. The 100 point system seems to work very well for some wineries, but the good news for others is that there are so many other channels now for marketing.

**Rising wine alcohol levels in U.S. and foreign wines are a hot topic these days in wine circles. What are your thoughts on the subject?**

This discussion has become pretty divisive amongst the wine trade, and in the media. Ultimately, I think we need to trust that the individual consumer will seek out wines they enjoy. The consumers' perception of balance and enjoyment may be different from that of an enologist or sommelier. Consumers have a broad range of preferences and styles. There's a wine out there for everyone.