

FEATURE ARTICLE

[Santa Maria Valley \(AVA\)](#)

My, has the Bien Nacido Vineyard come a long way in three decades.

Tepusquet [Bien Nacido Vineyard] soon was seen as a resource from which to offer not only a Chardonnay of true style and nuance (some said the wines approached a Burgundian lilt), but also a cool enough climate to wrest from it distinctive Pinot Noir and Syrah.

by [Dan Berger](#)

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Editor-at-Large Dan Berger traces the history and success of a one-of-a-kind vineyard.

The idea was economically sound: plant a vineyard that would basically cost very little because the tax incentives to do so were worth it. The idea appealed mainly to large corporations seeking a tax shelter.

Acquired by the Miller family in 1969, one large property near [Santa Maria](#) in [Santa Barbara County](#) was not yet a vineyard, but since corporate plantings were apace, the Millers saw the potential for their land to produce grapes for top-flight wines.

At the time, in the early 1970s, when this vineyard was going in, little was known about what grapes it would support. This was well before scientific studies of the 1980s and 1990s would become the refining elements for a property that had an all-but-unpronounceable name: Tepusquet, named for a creek which ran through the property.

Tepusquet (pronounced *tep-us-kay*) was quickly re-named by the Millers as **Bien Nacido Vineyards** of Rancho Tepusquet. Local legend has it that the latter word means “fishing for trout” in the Chumash Indian language.

Soon after the first grapes were harvested from the Bien Nacido property, it was clear that the resulting wine would help to redefine the character of California [Chardonnay](#) as we knew it. Until then, the most important style of Chardonnay was being made 400 miles to the north.

In the 1970s, the vast majority of California Chardonnays came from warmer areas such as Napa Valley or Sonoma County; little of it came from the cooler Carneros, then still a fledging growing region. Napa Chardonnay came from Mount Veeder, the Rutherford floor, the plains south of Yountville (now Oak Knoll), and other relatively warm regions. Sonoma Chardonnay came from Sonoma Valley and the distinctively warmer Alexander Valley.

THE HALCYON DAYS OF NO MALOLACTIC CHARDONNAY

It was a time when most Chardonnays did not go through malolactic fermentations. Indeed, the dean of California wine makers at the time, and perhaps the greatest wine maker in the state's history, Andre Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu Vineyard, never put a Chardonnay through malolactic, believing it robbed the warm-climate Chardonnay fruit of its heart and soul – its acidity. Nor did the Chateau St. Jean "Robert Young Vineyard" Chardonnay undergo malolactic.

Meanwhile, during those early years, Tepusquet was proving to be a temperamental child, with occasional ornery fits of under-ripeness causing some of the Chardonnay fruit to deliver a minty note amid its minerality and citrus-tropicality.

The early kindergarten teachers tamed the beast with adventuresome forays into trellising experiments, and with radical tactics in the winery to craft a wine that was tamer and less cantankerous. Without getting too bogged down in detail, Tepusquet soon was seen (mainly by locals) as a resource from which to offer not only a Chardonnay of true style and nuance (some said the wines approached a Burgundian lilt), but also a cool enough climate to wrest from it distinctive [Pinot Noir](#) and [Syrah](#).

Among the heroes of the early years and later, after the vineyard's re-naming to Bien Nacido, are Jim Clendenen of [Au Bon Climat](#); Ken Brown of [Zaca Mesa](#), then [Bryon](#), and now his own eponymous label; Adam Tolmach of [Ojai Vineyard](#), and Bob Lindquist of [Qupé](#).

The cool marine influence here dictated that the Bordeaux varieties be pulled out. So they were. And the marketplace (which was utterly remiss) turned its back on some of the state's finest Riesling. So it, too, was soon lost. And Sauvignon Blanc was seen as too vegetative here. But curiously, [Pinot Blanc](#) did so well in this soil and clime that it remained as a player, and the big three of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Syrah soon were joined by smaller plantings of other cool-hardy varieties.

VISIONARIES FROM THE NORTH SEE BIEN NACIDO'S MAGIC

Santa Barbara County has many locales in which to grow sensational fruit for those wines. But it was here, adjacent to Bien Nacido, that two of the visionaries saw the need to control their own destinies in this area of Santa Maria Valley. Jess Jackson and Robert Mondavi, in the late 1980s, linked hands for a brief and rare joint vineyard purchase, splitting the properties along mystical lines. Today, both have significant acreage nearby.

A small side note: so important was this area of the county that mighty Beringer, the huge winery in Napa then owned by Nestlé, was just seconds short of short-circuiting the Kendall-Jackson/Mondavi land deal, and taking huge parcels of land here for itself. Later, it did acquire a lot of land hereabouts anyway.

The curious thing about Tepusquet/Bien Nacido is that despite the vineyard name appearing on many wine labels, and despite the fact that wine makers up and down the coast have swooned when promised some of its fruit, the vast vineyard seems never to have gained the public recognition for its greatness.

Oh, it's true that Lindquist of Qupé long has made a stellar Syrah from Bien Nacido, and it was his technical paper on cool-climate Syrah that got many other cool-region vineyard owners to consider planting the variety. Still, few wine buyers

outside this region understood the value of the Bien Nacido name on the label.

Locally, of course, that's not true. Wine lovers who live between San Jose and Los Angeles, and most notably those who



Au Bon Climat winemaker, Jim Clendenen, was among the early adopters of the high quality cool-climate fruit from Bien Nacido.

live in Santa Barbara, pay strict attention to the vineyard's name, recognizing a style of wine that is anything but mainstream.

The acidity here produces a brightness in all wines, and the slow development of flavors can mean a distinctive wine, white or red. The Chardonnay notably often delivers a ripe apple and tropical fruit note along with a "pumpkin squash" element, but the racy citrus-y notes of the wines usually are what make them work with seafood.

The Pinots can be a tad on the leafy and/or rustic side, but all that does is push them half way to Burgundy, giving them an age-worthiness rare in warmer climes. And the Syrahs are nothing like the brutes which populate warmer regions like Paso Robles, Napa, or Alexander Valley.

And yes, one could argue that such wines take a bit of getting used to. But we all know that our first taste of a dill pickle or white truffles or escargots wasn't instantly lovable. It's a learned experience. Still, the classic nature of so many Bien Nacido wines appeals to purists who are prepared for a bit of cellar time for almost all the wines emanating from here. They know that even the Pinot Blancs, as fresh and delightful as they can be when released, usually deliver sublime elements if "lost" in the cellar for two to four more years.

And decanting all of the Bien Nacido wines can be an early solution for those who aren't quite sure what they have in front of them. A bit of aeration works wonders for these wines.

At long last, Bien Nacido and other nearby vineyards, like Sierra Madre, are reaching out to attract the attention they deserve.



In collaboration with several winemakers, Bien Nacido assembled a multi-winery 12-bottle offering of Bien Nacido Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays, Syrahs and Pinot Blancs.

(Limited Availability: [click here for details.](#))

***For a detailed view into the inner workings of Bien Nacido Vineyards,
read Dennis Schaefer's [interview with Nicholas Miller.](#)***
