

FEATURE ARTICLE

Santa Maria Valley (AVA)

Bien Nacido: The Vineyard is the Brand

One of the things that makes Bien Nacido Vineyard so unique is that the original 300 acres was actually planted like a nursery instead of a vineyard.

~Nicholas Miller

by [Dennis Schaefer](#)

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In 1969, brothers Steve and (the late) Bob Miller acquired two adjacent parcels in [Santa Maria Valley](#), both part of the original historic Ontiveros land grant and reunited them as Rancho Tepusquet. The Millers named their new property, Bien Nacido or "well born." They were a fourth generation farming family and, looking around at what their neighbors were doing, thought planting a vineyard would work better than row crops.

Today, **Bien Nacido Vineyards** is one of the most storied vineyards in the state and has grown to 900 acres, with 300 acres of [Chardonnay](#), 250 acres of [Pinot Noir](#), as well as [Syrah](#), [Pinot Blanc](#) and [Merlot](#). In the last decade, they have experimented with planting a wide number of other varietals, including Roussanne, Viognier, Petite Verdot, Pinot Gris, Nebiolo, Barbara, Tocai Fruilano and Refosco. At this point, nearly all the available land, including many of the hillsides, has been planted.

Located on the receiving end of the only east-west transverse mountain range in California, Bien Nacido Vineyard is a maritime-influenced desert. The morning fog cover and the cool afternoon breezes from the nearby Pacific Ocean make this a Region 1 climate. The rainfall averages 12 - 14 inches a year. The terrain is sand, chalk and marine loam that provides good drainage. The whole package means a nearly perfect environment for cool, slow ripening of grapes, with the added advantage of longer hangtime on the vines.

Nicholas Miller, the second of Steve Miller's two sons, is the fifth generation to become involved in family farming. A graduate of Bowdin College, he worked in the business world before returning, in 2004, to join the family business. He will be enthusiastically leading Bien Nacido Vineyard into the 21st century.

I spoke about the history of Bien Nacido Vineyard and the Miller's philosophy of "custom farming."



Bien Nacido Vineyards specializes in custom farming for its more than 50 winery customers and its white glove standards extend down to each individual row.

Dennis Schaefer (DS): *You purchased the (Bien Nacido) property in 1969; in the early 1970's, you became convinced that the soils and climate were ideal for growing grapes. What was the evidence that convinced you to plant grapes?*

Nicholas Miller (NM): We saw a lot of the same attributes at Bien Nacido Vineyard that are found in the great wine growing regions of the world. For example, we were able to plant the Pinot Noir in areas very similar to Burgundy. Not on the valley floor or hillside, but right where it starts sloping up.

We saw very well draining soil. We saw limestone in the soil. We saw hillsides with great sun exposure. We had very

even temperatures and very little rainfall. We had the cooling influence of the maritime breezes by being so close to the ocean, which is so conducive to growing Burgundian varieties.

We also had good friends with a lot of experience, Joe Tucker and Dale Hampton, who recognized what a gem we had acquired.

DS: *Once you made that decision, you could plant anything and any way you wanted. What was the thinking at that time about which grapes to plant? About how to orient the vineyard site, etc.?*

NM: One of the decisions from the beginning was to create a vineyard of the highest possible quality. For example, instead of wooden posts, we used more expensive steel. However, one of the things that makes Bien Nacido Vineyard so unique is that the original 300 acres was actually planted like a nursery instead of a vineyard. While many new vineyards were being planted from cuttings, the original Bien Nacido Vineyard planting was all certified virus free increase block from the mother vine at UC Davis. Nothing like this has ever done before or since. It meant that we could plant on their own root stocks, which many still are today - a rarity in the wine world.

There was a lot of trial and error and we got a lot of good advice. We got [Chardonnay](#) and [Pinot Noir](#) right from the beginning. Other varieties we found more difficult. And with others, such as (cool climate) [Syrah](#), we were true pioneers, and we have been duly rewarded.

DS: *What about clones?*

NM: Originally most of the Pinot Noir was Pommard and Martini and the Chardonnay was clone 4, but we have since planted many other new clones (5, 15, 17, 76, 95, 96, 124, 131, 548) and have about 12 clones of Pinot Noir alone now. We also have a nursery block where we are constantly experimenting with new clones and varieties. I am really excited about the prospect of Bien Nacido Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc and Grenache.



Bien Nacido Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley AVA is famous for its personalized block-by-block custom farming.

DS: *What about vineyard orientation?*

NM: Some of the original blocks were oriented east-west, but through the process of replanting and repairing, we either have or are in the process of reorienting them north-south for maximum and even sun exposure. We also originally planted on 12-foot spacing. We have since gone back and interplanted blocks within blocks. So while it appears to be a block on 6-foot spacing, it's actually two blocks in the same acreage being farmed and irrigated separately.

DS: *Part of it must have been trial and error. If I recall, I think you had some Riesling and Gewurztraminer that was later pulled out. What grape varieties didn't really work for you?*



Second generation winegrower, Nicholas Miller enthusiastically leads Bien Nacido Vineyard into the 21st century.

NM: You're right, we did originally have some Riesling and Gewurztraminer. It actually produced excellent fruit, but there was no market for it. Other varietals, such as Cabernet, never really ripened (too cold), but it was very successful as a nursery for other vineyards. We fought a long battle with Pinot Blanc and rot, until we decided to partner up with Mother Nature and produce a late harvest program. This has proved very successful and the Wine Enthusiast called the Bien Nacido Vineyard Paeonia (from Shadow Canyon) one of the best dessert wines from California. We also had a lot of problems with the original Merlot site throwing off a crop, so we planted some around the adobe (on the flats) and I think the Bozzano Bien Nacido Vineyard Merlot is the best Merlot from the Central Coast.

DS: *I seem to remember a conversation with your father or Bob Miller about some of your first harvests of Chardonnay. At the beginning, no one was buying it, so you sold it off to California sparkling wine houses to get blended away in their cuvees?*

NM: We did sell some fruit to sparkling wine houses at the very beginning, due to the infancy of the Santa Barbara wine industry and its demand. This was prior to the Central Coast Wine Services being able to provide a home and incubate new wineries. However, as life tends to come full circle, we are now once again being approached by several producers about wanting to do sparkling programs from our fruit. For example, Norm Yost does his Goat Bubbles from our Solomon Hills Vineyard fruit.

A funny story: once Chardonnay took off, we actually leveraged it against our Pinot Noir. Since no one had faith in California Pinot Noir at that time, we said that if they wanted Chardonnay, they had to take some Pinot Noir as well. This is very funny to me, considering in the current climate, I could sell our Pinot Noir for much higher prices than we are and could sell it five times over.

DS: *You mentioned this before but I understand that Bien Nacido is the largest certified increase block in California. Could you explain what that means and how that is important to winemakers and wineries all over California?*

NM: All of the vineyard was planted from the vines at UC Davis that are certified to be virus free. This means the material they were using was where nurseries got their material from. The practice at the time was to plant vineyards from cuttings from neighboring vineyards, so no one was checking what kinds of problems they were spreading. By planting a certified increase block we were assured they were the highest quality vines. We have never had an epidemic at Bien Nacido Vineyard and many of the 30+ year old vines are still on their own rootstock.

DS: *At last count, you sell grapes to 55 wineries; it's been every one from Fetzer and Villa Mt.Eden to Gary Farrell and Chris Whitcraft. Does that drive your vineyard manager crazy, keeping track of everything for so many clients?*

NM: I would put our vineyard manager, Chris Hammell, up against any in the state. He is incredibly talented and I think if you interview any of our customers, they'll all say the same. As you identified, we have customers from all over the state (and now in Oregon), as well as all different sizes. This takes an enormous amount of resources and attention to detail to custom farm for each of them. There is no question that Bien Nacido Vineyard would not be able to operate without the talent of Chris and his team.

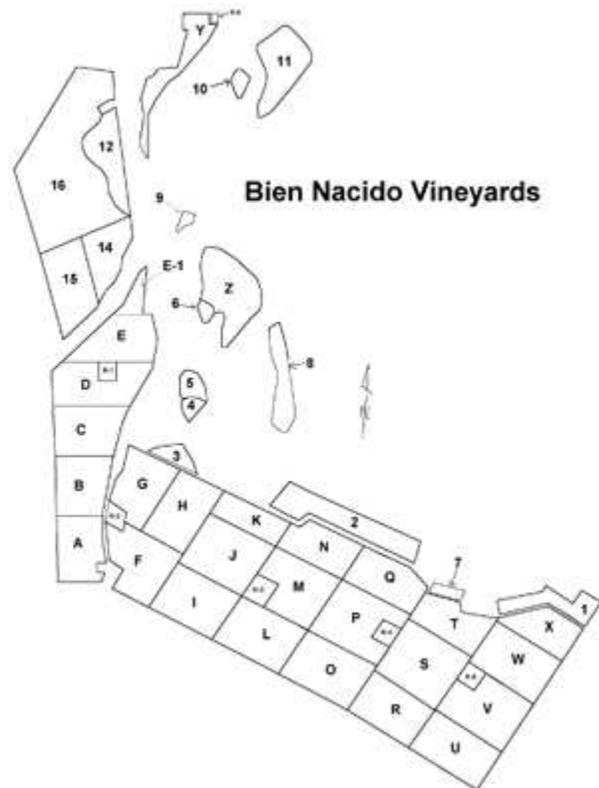
DS: *What is the most gratifying part of being able to source grapes to all these wineries?*

NM: I think the most gratifying part of having this breadth of customers is the fact that we have created a brand for the vineyard itself. One of the stories I frequently hear, which really puts a smile on my face, is when people tell me that whenever they are unfamiliar with a wine list, they simply order the wine from Bien Nacido.

On top of only working with the best wineries in the state from the beginning, we also have a clause in our contracts that says even if you are buying Bien Nacido Vineyard fruit, you cannot vineyard designate it unless the wine itself passes our quality control standards. Thus, we want the consumer to know that any time they see Bien Nacido on a label, they can trust that it's an exceptional bottle of wine.

DS: *As I understand it, you sell the grapes by acre, by block or even by row. How is this advantageous for both the grower and the buyer?*

NM: The reason we do it this way is to create a win-win scenario for us and our customers. The industry standard is to sell by the ton. This creates an inverse relationship where the vineyard is advantaged to hang more fruit on the vine, whereas the artisan winemakers want to crop it down and let the fruit hang longer (which further dehydrates and shrinks the tonnage). Therefore, by charging a flat rate for the acreage or rows, our customers can ask (and do) to have us crop their vines to 2.5 or 0.5 tons an acre and neither of us suffers.



This map of Bien Nacido Vineyard shows the various blocks of grapes, each individually farmed to the specifications of its winery customers.

DS: *Bien Nacido believes in "custom farming." What exactly does that mean?*

NM: As alluded to in the previous answer, this means we farm to the standards of our winemakers. While some of the wineries rely on the expertise of Chris Hammell, many also take a much more active role. For example, some winemakers visit just at harvest time, whereas others walk the rows year round. While all of our wineries decide when they want to pick, many make requests year round. For example, some programs request organic or biodynamic farming techniques to be used; some want to crop their fruit to extremely low numbers; some want us to train their vines differently; some want us to stress the fruit more with a lack of irrigation, etc. Custom farming means that we don't just deliver contracted fruit on your doorstep come fall. We work with you year round and create a partnership to suit the style of your winery.

DS: *I understand that you will "custom farm" a single block or even a specific set of rows within that block. In fact, many winemakers request the same blocks/rows year after year. Isn't that expensive to do?*

NM: The short answer, YES! Most vines at the vineyard are touched by hand an average of 7 times a year. Our white gloves approach to farming is very time consuming and expensive. However, it is the commitment we have made to produce the highest possible quality of fruit. As for the winemakers in certain blocks, yes, there is definitely a pride of ownership among those customers. Some of our customers have had their same rows for over 20 years. In fact, some are so proud that, starting with Whitcraft's Q Block Pinot, they have gone beyond vineyard designating their wine and actually put on the bottle which block it comes from.

DS: *James Ontiveros, your director of sales and marketing, once said that at Bien Nacido, "it's the difference between partnering with a winery and growing a commodity." Could you elaborate on that?*

NM: Most vineyards in the state who sell their fruit to other wineries simply sign a contract to sell their fruit. If winery X

wants to buy Cabernet from vineyard Y, they will decide on the amount to be delivered and when its ready, vineyard Y will deliver the agreed upon amount of Cabernet to winery X.

Bien Nacido Vineyard is different. We have a much greater demand for our fruit than we can supply. We unfortunately are constantly turning down wineries who are requesting our fruit. However, what this does mean is that we are given the luxury of selecting wineries that we feel have a true commitment to quality from the beginning. We sit down with them and decide which fruit on the ranch will work best with the program they are building. We then farm to their specifications and host them at the ranch as much as they can make it.

We keep vehicles and a guest house on the ranch specifically for visiting winemakers to check on their vines. They get to decide how we farm it and when it is ready to harvest. Then after the wine is made, we do a great deal of marketing and PR work for our customers. We host members of the media, consumers, distributors, and industry at the ranch for seminars and tastings. We do radio shows and industry events, all to promote our customers. We submit our customer's wines for scoring. I think you would be hard-pressed to find another vineyard in the country that does more for its customers than we do.

DS: *Bien Nacido was one of the first vineyards to be designated on different bottlings from so many quality wineries. Did you just stumble onto that or did you develop that vineyard designated philosophy over time?*

NM: No, it was really a conscious effort on the part of my uncle, Bob, and my Dad to create what Bien Nacido Vineyard has become. From the beginning, they wanted to create a vineyard that was special, not just a commodity producer. It's why they went the extra mile on everything from the planting forward. At the time of planting, Santa Barbara County did not have a very large wine industry. Most of the fruit down here was sent to the North Coast. Bob and Steve wanted to change that. It's one of the reasons they developed the Central Coast Wine Services into what it has become.

At Bien Nacido Vineyard, they saw that they could control more of their destiny by partnering up with the smaller artisan winemakers who would form a partnership of good PR and speak to the virtues of Bien Nacido Vineyard.

Appellation America is pleased to announce the limited availability of the first **Bien Nacido Collector's Case (\$395)**, a



sampler of 12 vineyard-designated wines from 12 different wineries, such as Au Bon Climat, Qupe, Ojai and Tantara.

Order yours today, while quantities last!

Read Editor-at-Large, Dan Berger's 30 year retrospective on the evolution of Bien Nacido Vineyard.
