

WORLD OF WINE

by Judy Willis, M.D.

(Dr. Willis and her husband, Dr. Paul Willis, are prize-winning amateur winemakers. She can be reached by e-mail at GilaMon@aol.com.)



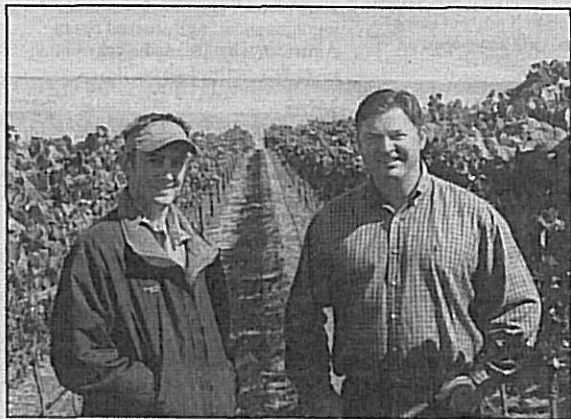
Good Birth from Great Earth

Nicholas Miller is the second of Steve Miller's two sons, making him the fifth generation in his family to be involved in California agriculture. During high school and college, he spent several summers working with the family business. Upon graduating from Bowdoin College, in Maine, Nicholas took a position with a marketing consulting firm in Boston before returning to California to work fulltime for the family business in 2004 in Santa Maria.

were planted by Nicholas's father and uncle.

While the ranch itself had always been called "Rancho Tepusquet," the Millers selected the name "Bien Nacido ("well-born") Vineyards of Rancho Tepusquet" for the vineyard operation.

As Bien Nacido Vineyards has grown to more than 900 acres, of which more than 300 acres are planted to Chardonnay, more than 250 to Pinot Noir, and a number of acres each to



Nicholas Miller (left) and James Ontiveros in Solomon Hills Vineyard, where Judy and Paul Willis, and many of Santa Barbara's most reputable winemakers, pick up their grapes

Telling it from Nicholas's side, though, only yields a fraction of the story. In 1837, Juan Bautista Alvarado made a Spanish land grant of some two square leagues to Tomas Olivera, then Gobernador of Alta California. This grant covered Bien Nacido Vineyards's nearly 9,000 acres ranging upward to the San Rafael Mountains from the Santa Maria Mesa, which bordered the Sisquoc and Cuyama Rivers. The ranch was generously watered by Tepusquet Creek, so called by the Chumash Indians to whom it meant, "fishing for trout." Thomas Olivera sold Rancho Tepusquet in 1855 to his son-in-law Don Juan Pacifico Ontiveros and daughter Martina, whose heirs divided the property until only about 1,400 acres remained.

In 1969, the Millers purchased the property along with an adjacent parcel, which had been part of the original land grant, and reunited the two as Rancho Tepusquet, comprising more than 2,000 acres. The original adobe remains one of the few privately maintained adobes in California. It is used for special events and fundraisers, such as a recent one for Santa Maria's hospital.

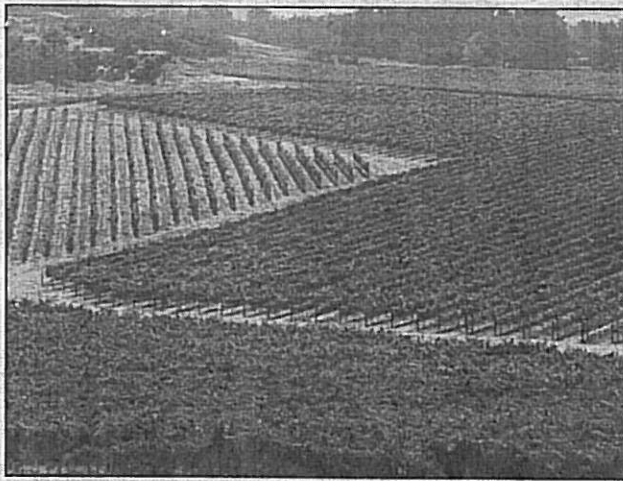
In the early 1970s, it became clear to the Millers that the soils and climate were ideal for growing grapes so Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Merlot

Pinot Blanc, Syrah and Merlot, its operators have continued to experiment and "give back" to the wine business. Since 1992, experimental plantings of Pinot Gris, Barbera, Roussanne, Nebiolo, Viognier, Petite Verdot, Tocal and Refosco, as well as new clones of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Syrah and Merlot have been added.

Muy Bien

Significant events in California's winemaking history took place at Bien Nacido. In 1992, winemaker Chris Whitcraft of Whitcraft Wines, who was one of the early producers of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Bien Nacido grapes, began to label the front of his bottles not only with the name of the vineyard, but also with the specific block of rows from which the grapes came. "I was the first to do this with my Whitcraft Bien Nacido Q Block," says Chris. "I wanted to have a record of the wine characteristics of the different grape clones planted in the blocks in case I, or anyone else, wanted to plant either of them in the future. It turned out that I liked the individual qualities in both the N and Q blocks, so I have kept them as separate Pinots."

What does Chris think about Bien Nacido? "As well as Bien Nacido has done year after year, they never stop



The terrain at Bien Nacido, a mixture of sand, chalk and loam, drains well and produces vines that bear lots of grapes

trying to do better," he says.

During a walk-through of Bien Nacido and its well-tended vines, Nicholas explained, "We are a series of individual vineyards in that we farm to the needs of each winemaker. They can determine how much leaf pruning and crop drop suits their style and we'll follow their instructions. By charging for grapes by the acre, rather than by the ton, the winemakers can determine how much crop they want to get from their blocks."

There are three winemaking facilities on the property, one of which is leased to Bob Lindquist of Qupe Winery and Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat Winery, another to Jeff Fink and Bill Cates of Tantara Winery, and the newest to Greg Linn of Ambullneo Vineyards. In addition to these winemakers, Bien Nacido and the two other premium Miller family vineyards - Solomon Hills and French Camp - sell grapes to select winemakers, including Whitcraft, Hitching Post, Foxen, Longoria, Ojai Vineyards, Jaffurs, Gary Farrell, Sine Qua Non, Stephen Ross, Landmark, Villa Mt. Eden and Lane Tanner.

You may notice that some wine bottles are single vineyard or "vineyard designate," meaning that the name of the vineyard is featured on the front label above or below the name of the wine. When winemakers sign a contract to purchase fruit from Bien Nacido or Solomon Hills Vineyard they are not permitted to put the vineyard name on the label until the wine is approved by the Millers or James Ontiveros, a descendent of the historic Ontiveros family, who is director of sales and marketing for all three Miller Family Vineyards.

One Microclimate

Just what is it about this vineyard that has made it one of the most prestigious and best-known in the appellation? It is one of the coolest wine-growing regions in the state, resulting in a long growing season that allows for fully developed flavors and bright acidity in the grapes. I was able to

experience the climatic influences by spending the night in a house in the middle of the vineyard. I was able to walk through the cooling morning fog before the mid-morning summer sun broke through. As the day wore on and temperatures inland reached the 100-degree-plus mark, the vineyard high peaked out in the low 80s and the early afternoon cooling breezes that blow in from the Pacific provided an ideal climate for Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Syrah and several other Rhône varieties of grapes which thrive with the cooler temperatures and longer hang time on the vines.

Then there is the factor of rain. "This is a marine-influenced desert off the ocean because the rainfall drops on the mountains on either side of our valley," says James Ontiveros. "If Santa Maria or Santa Barbara get thirty inches of rain, we get twelve. That, plus the cooler temperatures make us a true region, one microclimate." Finally, the terrain is mostly sand, chalk and loam marine basin that was left behind when ocean floor once reached out that far, providing the great drainage that produces phenomenal fruit-bearing vines with intensely flavored and structured grapes.

I asked Nicholas whether further growth was planned. "We want to stay small enough to be family-owned and managed - to always know what is going on and be responsive to the needs of the winemakers who purchase our fruit," he says. "We love what we do as growers and want to continue to enjoy it on the scale we know will let us maintain the personal connections with the earth and farming that our family has had for five generations."

Purple Prizes

This year was full of prizes for me and my winemaker husband, Paul. First, we received Pinot Noir grapes from Solomon Hills Vineyard, thanks to Nicholas Miller and James Ontiveros. Next week, we will receive Syrah grapes from Vogelzang Vineyards, courtesy of Montecito's Mary Beth Vogelzang. Both of these vineyards have waiting

lists of top winemakers who admire their grapes. My promise, in exchange for the privilege of purchasing our small allotments, is to report on the outcome of our home wine and to donate bottles of the wines we make to local charitable events under our label, Chateau Huit Feet (you French speakers can figure out how many Willis family feet stomp those grapes).

The other prize that comes with home winemaking are the friends who over the years have joined us for the alchemy of turning grapes into wine. This year, Gary Trevor helped us. His reaction follows:

Paul and Judy,

Thank you for including me in the sorting and stomping of those beautiful grapes. When you and Paul opened the door with grape juice up to your elbows I knew I was in for a treat! What a sight it was to see all those grapes spread out on your table for sorting. A home's table sees a lot of life's events, and yours ... if it could only share its stories. I have tired and happy feet. When I got home Terra (my wife) was not so interested in seeing me, as she was in seeing the condition of my feet. She missed a good time, one I will never forget.

Judy, Thank you for the bottle of Syrah and I love the family label. When you gave it to me last night, I was so tired and over-stimulated, I couldn't give it proper recognition. I think you guys need a plaque in an arch form over the entry way to your dining room with the words: "Chateau Huit Feet." What a journey it

has been for you all since you started your home winemaking in 1991, and how far you have come.

*Love,
Gary*

Sip Tip

Sansum Diabetes Research Institute presents 4th Annual "Taste of the Vine," on Sunday, October 16 from 2 pm to 5 pm at the Santa Barbara Woman's Club, 670 Mission Canyon Road. Wine and cuisine from 40 restaurants and vintners, auction and live music. Tickets \$75 in advance, \$85 at the door. Call 682-7838, x243 to reserve.