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## Bien Nacido, elite California vineyard

By Dave McIntyre  
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Nicholas Miller seemed reluctant to extol the virtues of [Bien Nacido Vineyards](#) as he drove me around the property his family has farmed for four decades in California's northern Santa Barbara County. I was there to write about an iconic American vineyard that is famed for producing some of the country's best wines, but all he wanted to talk about was the weather.

"The Santa Maria Valley has the longest growing season of any wine region in California, with bud break sometimes as early as February," Miller said. Although it's in Southern California, the valley, like much of Santa Barbara County, is considered a cool-climate region for grapes. He pointed to the west, where the Santa Maria River flows into the Pacific 17 miles away through flat land that offers no barrier to ocean fog and cooling breezes. "Most of California's valleys are shielded from the ocean by north-south mountain ranges, but the San Rafael Mountains run northwest to southeast, channeling the cool air past Bien Nacido and throughout the Santa Maria Valley," he said.

The cool mornings and evenings benefit the grapes. A coastal inversion that hits the area each June and July suppresses temperatures and slams the brakes on photosynthesis. Even when the heat returns in August, it rarely spikes above 90 degrees for more than a few hours.

Bien Nacido is ideally situated to take advantage of this climate. The estate lies where the Sisquoc and Cuyama rivers join to become the Santa Maria, at the northern end of the San Rafael chain, where the mountains dissolve into a series of dramatic folds, as though a giant long ago clawed the earth. Most of the nearly 600 acres of vineyards are on south- or southwest-facing slopes in poor, loamy soils, territory seemingly destined to grow grapes.

California wine is still young compared with its centuries-old, tradition-laden European counterparts. The Golden State does not have storied vineyards such as Clos de Vougeot or Romanee-Conti in Burgundy, Clos Ste. Hune in Alsace and Clos du Mesnil in Champagne. Certain vineyards, however, have performed superbly enough - if over decades rather than centuries - to earn them special status as America's premier vineyards.

Bien Nacido ranks among them. The key to its success and its terroir lies in the good fortune of its climate and geography, as well as shrewd management by its owners and the talents of dozens of winemakers who have crafted wines from its fruit.

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The vineyard's history extends into California's colonial past. The area was part of a Spanish land grant of 9,000 acres in 1837, when it was called Rancho Tepusquet. In the late 1850s, Don Juan Pacifico Ontiveros built an adobe home for his family and planted several crops, including wine grapes. A descendent, James Ontiveros, now works for the Millers, helping to manage the estate. The adobe, recently restored, remains a centerpiece of the property.

Nicholas Miller's father, Stephen, and his uncle Robert, fourth-generation farmers, bought the property in 1969 and began planting grapevines four years later. They called the estate Bien Nacido, or "Well Born," a nickname given to it by the Mexican vineyard workers who joked that the land was as coddled as a privileged child. The first lots they planted were named less imaginatively as A through Z. (When they ran out of letters, they started over with Block 1.)

In the early years, most of the grapes were sold to large wineries such as Korbel, but in the late 1980s, the Millers began looking for artisanal, small-production winemakers to take advantage of the vineyard's full potential. They recruited Jim Clendenen and Adam Tolmach of [Au Bon Climat](#) and Bob Lindquist of [Qupe](#) to make wines from their fruit and label them with the vineyard name. The wines excelled, and Bien Nacido's reputation skyrocketed.

Today, Clendenen, Lindquist and Tolmach - who launched his own winery, [Ojai Vineyard](#), in 1991 - are still the winemakers most associated with the property. Au Bon Climat and Qupe share a winery at Bien Nacido. (Another winery that uses their grapes, Tantara, is nearby.)

Over the years, the quality of Bien Nacido grapes has attracted other big names in California wine, such as [Whitcraft](#), [Lane Tanner](#), [Gary Farrell](#), [Longoria](#) and Sine Qua Non. Even "northern" wineries such as [Villa Mt. Eden](#) in Napa County and [Landmark](#) in Sonoma produce wines from Bien Nacido fruit. The vineyard is so prized among winemakers and wine lovers that some wines are even labeled according to the particular block where they originated. Block Z is famous for syrah, while blocks I, Q and N are noted for pinot noir. The Millers contract by plot or block rather than by grape tonnage, and they farm each parcel according to the client's specifications, including organic and biodynamic methods on some blocks.

What makes Bien Nacido fruit so sought after? Miller says the long growing season helps promote balance and structure in the wines. "Slow ripening helps maintain acidity while avoiding late sugar spikes," he said.

Clendenen credits the site's varied topography for extending the harvest. "This place is unique because we have very specific growing conditions that allow us to harvest grapes over three months' time," he said. Pinot noir ripens in early September, while syrah typically is ready to pick in October. In some years, the harvest can extend into November, which is possible because Santa Barbara County does not get the autumn rains that hit wine regions farther north in California and Oregon.

Bien Nacido's location at the northern end of the Santa Maria Valley is important, said Jeff Wilkes, who worked there in the 1980s and now makes wine under his J. Wilkes label. "Just a little farther inland down the valley, the temperature gets a little warmer, and you don't get the same balance in the wines," he said. And "closer to the ocean, the grapes won't ripen."

Do those factors translate into the wines? "There's no question that Bien Nacido pinot noir has a

certain personality," Tolmach said. "There's a certain herbal tinge to the fruit, and I mean that in a positive way."

Lindquist agreed. "There is definitely a Bien Nacido terroir," he said. "There's a level of spice in the pinot noir and syrah grown here. It's hard to put my finger on it, but it's a hard spice, like cardamom or cinnamon - an Asian spice."

The Miller team now consists of Steve, Nicholas and Steve's second son, Marshall, along with vineyard manager Chris Hammel, who joined the company in 2001. (Robert Miller died in 2006.) For nearly 40 years the family has farmed Bien Nacido and let others express the vineyard's voice through their winemaking. This year, however, the Millers will release their first wines under their own Bien Nacido Vineyards label: a 2007 pinot noir that manages to be silky and voluptuous yet tightly structured, and a 2007 syrah that offers sweet cherry, olive and prosciutto flavors with that Bien Nacido spice on the finish. There will also be a 2008 chardonnay from Solomon Hills Vineyard, another Miller-owned property a few miles to the southwest, that combines lush California fruit with refreshing acidity.

Was it difficult to make wine after so many years concentrating on growing the grapes? I asked Nicholas Miller.

He smiled and said, "Well, we had some good consultants to help."

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