

## Bien Nacido Vineyard: Santa Maria Valley's Pinot Noir Heritage

A short bus ride brought a group of us out to Bien Nacido Vineyard to listen to a panel of local wine-growers with over 100 years of accumulated winemaking experience discuss the special attributes of this heritage vineyard. Undaunted by the rain that pelted the tent on the property, attendees were captivated as the history of this magnificent vineyard was told by James Ontiveros.



James is currently the Director of Sales and Marketing for Bien Nacido Vineyard, Solomon Hills Vineyard, French Camp Vineyard, the Central Coast Wine Services and the Paso Robles Wine Services. He is a native of the Santa Maria Valley and represents the ninth generation of a family that once owned the land grant on which Bien Nacido Vineyard is located. In 1837, a Spanish land grant was made to Tomas Olivera by Juan Bautista Alvarado, then Gobernador of Alta California. This grant included 9,000 acres which were watered by Tepusquet Creek. Tomas Olivera sold Rancho Tepusquet in 1855 to his son-in-law, Don Juan Pacifico Ontiveros who constructed an adobe on the property in 1857 and moved to the ranch. He raised horses, cattle, sheep, grains and grapes. Over the subsequent years, his heirs divided the property until only fourteen hundred acres remained surrounding the Ontiveros Adobe. The Adobe remains today as one of the few privately-owned adobes in California.



In 1969, the Millers, a fifth generation California farming family, purchased the property. At the time, there were sparse plantings of grapes up and down the California coast. In the early 1970s, the Millers realized that the soils and climate were perfect for growing grapes. Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Merlot were planted in 1973. A couple of years earlier, Sanford and Benedict Vineyard had been planted in what is now the Ste. Rita Hills AVA and the two vineyards became the cornerstones of the Santa Barbara County wine industry. The world-class grapes that came from these two vineyards

proved that this was to be a major wine-producing region. Bien Nacido and Sanford & Benedict have become brands, a seal of quality.

The ranch had always been known as Rancho Tepusquet, but the Millers chose the name, "Bien Nacido Vineyards of Rancho Tepusquet" for the vineyard operation. Bien Nacido is Spanish for "been born well." Today Bien Nacido Vineyards consists of over 900 acres, of which over 300 acres are planted to Chardonnay, over 250 to Pinot Noir, and a number of acres to Pinot Blanc, Syrah and Merlot. Since 1992, there have been numerous experimental plantings of several other varietals and new clones of Pinot Noir. Over forty wineries buy some portion of the grapes harvested here and of these, most feature the vineyard name on their labels. Some notable Pinot Noir wineries include Au Bon Climat, Bernardus, Bonaccorsi, Byron, David Bruce, Foley Estates, Ken Brown, Longoria, Ojai Vineyards, Rusack, Fess Parker, Foxen, Hitching Post, Stephen Ross, Tantara, Testarossa, Wild Horse and Whitcraft. Generally, grapes are sold by the row, not by the ton. Winemakers have single blocks (about 10 acres) or rows in certain blocks and keep these specific plantings over many years. Each block is custom-farmed according to the needs of the winemaker. The net result is that there can be considerable variation in Bien Nacido wines that reflect the winemaker. There are currently 20 blocks in production with 5 new blocks being developed in the hillsides that will complete the available plantable land.

Bien Nacido Vineyards is on an elevated benchland near the town of Santa Maria. Seventeen miles to the west is the Pacific ocean and to the east are the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains. The vineyard enjoys cool evenings and mornings due to the maritime influence and are inland just enough to have warm days tempered by afternoon cool ocean breezes. The combination leads to perfect ripening of cool-climate grapes like Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Bien Nacido Vineyards is the largest California planting of certified mother vines from UC Davis. It is one of the major viticultural nurseries in the state for certified, varietal budwood. The vineyard was one of the first to use galvanized steel stakes and guide wires for trellising. Both Au Bon Climat and Qupe Wineries have facilities on the property and a third facility is leased to Jeff Fink and Bill Cates of Tantara Winery.

Bob Miller was a visionary who knew the importance of nurturing the small winemakers. Central Coast Wine Services was built by him in 1989 in Santa Maria to assist boutique wineries. The huge facility (220,000 sq-ft) has become a dormitory for over 25 small wineries who share equipment, storage and lab analysis. A similar facility is now open in Paso Robles.

The panel for "Bien Nacido Vineyard - A Tribute" consisted of Lane Tanner, Lane Tanner Winery, Stephen Dooley, Stephen Ross Wine Cellars, Jeffrey Fink, Tantara Winery, Dick Dore, Foxen Vineyard, and Jim Clendenen, Au Bon Climat. All panel members have worked with original Bien Nacido plantings.

Lane Tanner: Lane has sourced fruit from Bien Nacido since 1990. She is the most "senior" winemaker at Central Coast Wine Services. She picks early (often two weeks before others), uses little new oak, and strives for gentility. **2003 Lane Tanner Winery Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir** (magnum) - N block (Martini clone planted on own rootstock in 1973). An elegant Pinot with bright fruit, a hint of white pepper and silky tannins. **1993 Lane Tanner Winery Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir** (magnum) - a very charming older wine that retains an attractive fruity nose and notable citrus elements. The grapes were picked on August 31, 1993 - the day of the Blue Moon. "The fairies danced and laughed in the canopy, as they drank the dew off of the ripe grapes, their gossamer wings shim-



shimmering under the full blue moon. Perhaps they danced on these grapes..." What a treat!

Stephen Dooley: He began using Bien Nacido grapes from Block G in 1995 and more recently has incorporated some newer Dijon clone plantings into his Pinot Noir from the vineyard. The Pinot Noirs he crafts from Bien Nacido have a distinctive peppery nuance and are silky, soft and age well. **2004 Stephen Ross Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir** - Block N clone 115 young vines and Block G clone old vines. A bigger style with luscious fruit and spice, generous tannins. **2000 Stephen Ross Bien Nacido Vineyard Pinot Noir** - color fading slightly, subdued nose, fruits tending toward prune.

Jeffrey Fink: He has made Pinot Noir from Bien Nacido since 1992. **2003 Tantara Winery Bien Nacido Adobe Pinot Noir** - plenty of spice, a dusting of black pepper, balanced, very likeable. **2000 Tantara Winery Bien Nacido Old Vines Pinot Noir** - own-rooted Pommard clone 4 planted in 1973. A leaner, rustic wine with notable wood, mineral and leather notes.

Dick Dore: First Bien Nacido vineyard designate was in 1993. **2004 Foxen Vineyard Bien Nacido Vineyard Block 8 Pinot Noir** - Block 8 is 12 acres, planted to 5 clones and farmed exclusively for Foxen. Block 8 is Bien Nacido Vineyard's highest and steepest block. Generous sweet fruit, very ripe style, noticeable tannins on finish. **2002 Foxen Vineyard Bien Nacido Vineyard Block 8** - This wine shows the effects of aging as the tannins are very soft and well-integrated. The wine is balanced and a pleasure to sip.

Jim Clendenen: Jim started out making wine in a chicken shed on Los Alamos Vineyards with Bob Lindquist. It was when Bob Miller built a 5,000 square foot facility on Bien Nacido grounds for Jim and Bob that their winemaking career took off. Jim is a proponent of high acid wines that go with food. He is adamantly opposed to some of the current styles of Pinot Noir that appeal to novice drinkers, or to critics. "Nobody can tell me a 15 percent, 4-gram acid wine is food compatible. It's not. You just take a sip with food and all of a sudden you get this wash of alcohol." **2003 Au Bon Climat Santa Maria Valley Knox Alexander Pinot Noir** - a terrific understated wine that is elegant and well-composed. **2000 Au Bon Climat Santa Maria Valley Knox Alexander Pinot Noir** - plenty of acid for sure but not particularly appealing without some food.

What is the Bien Nacido flavor profile? The consensus of the panel was flavors of red fruits (cherry, raspberry), spice (cardamon, cinnamon stick, clove, white or black pepper). The tannins are fine and acidity is ideal to pair with food. The older plantings show more red fruits, acidity, and rusticity, while the newer plantings tend to show more herbal components with noticeable tannin and more black fruits.

