


NICHOLAS MILLER WALKS US THROUGH
HIS FAMILY PROPERTY, **BIEN NACIDO**,
THE MOST FAMOUS NAME ON CALIFORNIA'S
CENTRAL COAST

Bearer of Fruit

It's always a treat to experience a private tour of a vineyard with the winemaker, but this particular misty harvest dawn seems to immediately engage all the senses. As we climb higher to our desired block in the vineyard, the meticulous rows just disappear, magically vanishing into the foggy hillside. The tiny black clusters of Pinot Noir grapes are still drenched and dripping with overnight coastal moisture, and the air is so thick we can barely see. Bien Nacido Vineyard never looked so beautiful.

story and photos by Rob Brown

A photograph of two men in a vineyard. One man, Nicholas Miller, stands on the left wearing a light-colored striped sweater and blue jeans. The other man, Trey Fletcher, is crouching on the right wearing a dark blue jacket and pants, holding a small object in his hand. They are surrounded by rows of grapevines with green leaves and some clusters of grapes. The background is a misty, foggy hillside.

Nicholas Miller and Trey Fletcher
determine the right time to pick
Pinot, at the highest block on the
Bien Nacido property.

This legendary vineyard is simply magnificent. You want to stop and applaud every time you drive by. Everyone wants her fruit. For people that need a special river for their region, Bien Nacido has two. The pristine property sprawls across hillsides that come together at the union of the Tempusquet and Sisquock rivers to form the Santa Maria River. The cool coastal fog of the Santa Maria Valley creates the longest growing season in the state and is ideal for growing superb Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

The Miller family purchased the land in the late '60s, during the birth of the Santa Barbara wine scene, from the Hancock family (as in tony Los Angeles enclave Hancock Park). Their label humbly claims that they had no way of knowing what a tremendous producer the vineyard would one day become, but with five generations of farming in Southern California, maybe they had a pretty good idea.

The Millers have been pioneers in the industry, growing a variety of Pinot Noir clones on various rootstocks. Their fruit is in such demand and their customer base is so talented, they only work with committed, high-end single-vineyard programs.

With their meticulous farming techniques, combined with varied soils and microclimates, the vineyard can produce custom profiles to fit different customers' tastes. They took that recent California State Fair honor of "Vineyard of the Year," an award that covers the entire state (how about that, Northern California!)

"Terroir is exactly what every vineyard is trying to achieve—a site so special, it has a sense of place. That sparkle factor. Something special that can't be found elsewhere," comments land owner Nicholas Miller. The fifth-generation grower wears so many different hats, I don't know which title to call him by. At least it's accurate to call him last year's winemaker. After witnessing the quality of prestigious wineries throughout California, with the extreme success from their fruit, the Millers have recently produced their own labels of superior wines from their estate vineyards, Bien Nacido and Solomon Hills.

"The wines we make showcase our family's two vineyards," Miller says.

Solomon Hills is the family's other jewel in the elite Santa Maria bench. Close to the Pacific, bracing ocean breezes cool the vines, which benefit from the long, lingering growing season. The soil in this prestigious mesa—distant beach sand—produces a grape with extreme finesse and prettiness.

James Ontiveros, Director of Sales and Marketing for the various Miller properties, is a native of the Santa Maria Valley and descendant of the pioneering family that once owned the land grant on which Bien Nacido Vineyard is located. "Pinot is the only red grape that should be elegant, refined and pretty, with verve and life!" he tells THE TASTING PANEL. "The warmer, bigger wines can be clunky and unctuous."

The two current releases from Solomon Hills include the 2008 Pinot Noir and 2009 Chardonnay. Both are stunning examples of these varietals, with high acid, fully ripened fruit, great depth and balance. The Chardonnay is a big, mouth-coating experience. The acid levels stand up nicely to the fruit, with subtle mineral notes and a great velvety texture. The Pinot is absolutely exquisite, with elegant notes of dark cherry, strawberry perfume and rose petals.

What great timing! Now down from the foggy hillsides, this year's harvest from Solomon Hills Pinot has just arrived at the winery. Trey Fletcher, who has recently been named winemaker for the two labels, brings a varied experience from Northern California and Argentina. Although the vineyard operation is enormous, the winery still has a lot of usable space. Production is very limited. "Fresh strawberries and Christmas spice," comments Fletcher while analyzing the de-stemmed one-hour juice sample.

"We are growers, first and foremost," says Miller. "We are custom farmers and do what the vineyard gives us. Customers purchase fruit from Bien Nacido Vineyard because there's something special from that vineyard." Many premier Sonoma and Russian River wineries even include BNV single-vineyard offerings as part of their Pinot portfolios. "We even sell grapes to Oregon. That really puts a smile on my face!" ■■■



Solomon Hills Pinot Noir on the crush pad at the winery. The 2011 SH Pinot was just sorted and de-stemmed.



Bien Nacido 2008 Pinot Noir possesses rich dark ripe fruit flavors with bold structure and finesse.