

WINE News

*The grass is green enough
on the Domestic side.*



FEBRUARY 17, 2020 FEATURES

- 1 Bien Nacido: A California Grand Cru
- 2 On the Oregon Wine Trail
- 3 Nalle: Return to Dry Creek Roots

West Coast: Old Vines, Icons, and Introductions

By Ryan Woodhouse

This edition of Wine News packs plenty of diverse West Coast wine into its pages! Kaj Stromer gives us his take on the current state of play in Oregon wine country, after his epic trip to Willamette Valley, where he tasted 250-plus wines. Stefanie Juelsgaard guides us through the classically styled and ever-delicious wines of Dry Creek Valley stalwart, Nalle. But first, we kick off with a deep dive into one of my all-time favorite vineyards in the great state of California: Bien Nacido. This iconic vineyard in Santa Maria Valley may not have the glitz and glam of Napa, but what it lacks in extravagant fanfare it more than makes up in pure quality and pedigree.

A California Grand Cru

Bien Nacido Vineyard, in the northwest reaches of Santa Maria Valley, has always attracted my attention. And it has proven to me, time and time again, that it deserves to be considered one of California's "Grand Crus." Although it is quite a large and parcelled vineyard, with many aspects and nuances, what stands out to me is the consistency of quality across the many wines produced from here. Simply put, you very rarely find a bad bottle of wine with Bien Nacido on the label.

The vineyard is fed a constant supply of cool, marine air from the nearby Pacific Ocean by the Transverse mountain ranges, funneling onshore breezes over the vines. This is one of the coolest growing regions in the state, which allows extended hang time and flavor development. The vineyards soils are generally sandy or gravelly loam with some chalky deposits. Higher elevation blocks can be very steep, though most of the vineyard sits on the Tepusquet Bench that runs along the northern edge of Santa Maria Valley proper. It's a near-perfect southwest-facing aspect,

catching the sun's rays while the ocean breezes moderate the summer afternoon temperatures. Another thing Bien Nacido has going for it is vine maturity. Many blocks are now over 40 years old and growing on their own roots. The Miller family, who planted the vineyard and farm it to this day, are dedicated growers with a focus on quality over quantity. They allow many clients to give input on how they want their contracted blocks farmed. Much of the vineyard's 900 acres are farmed organically, and some biodynamically. Crop levels are determined by the individual customer, as contracts are for specific blocks or rows, not simply grapes sold by the ton—which is more typical in the industry. This level of control allows many winemakers to treat Bien Nacido as a quasi estate property and gives them a high level of control over the quality of fruit they harvest.

Here are a few of my current favorite wines from this hallowed site:

2016 Chanin "Bien Nacido Vineyard" Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay (\$34.95) Gavin Chanin honed his winemaking skills under Jim Clendenen (Au Bon Climat) and Bob Lindquist (Qupe) and has a huge amount of experience working with fruit from this site. This particular bottling comes from the W-Block, which was originally planted in 1973 to Riesling and later top-grafted to Chardonnay. It's a highly aromatic and flavorful wine with white floral notes, preserved lemon, Marcona almonds, and oyster shell minerality.
96 JD, 93 VN, 93 RP



(Continued on page 4)

On the Oregon Wine Trail

By Kaj Stromer

One of the most impressive “coming-of-age” stories in wine is the ascension of Oregon to a position of prominence among the world’s wine-producing regions. Oregon now stands as an equal to some of the best of them.

I spent a week in the Willamette Valley in early January visiting over 20 wineries. During that time we tasted roughly 250 wines—red, white, and sparkling. On the whole, the wines were world-class. The Pinot Noirs have never been better, some producers make stunningly distinctive Pinot Gris, and most notably, Oregon Chardonnay is simply delicious.



Need we say, the iconic red barn at Maresh.

But what really left an impression on me was the confidence with which the winemakers speak. Once upon a time, they nervously compared themselves to Burgundy’s Côte d’Or, even suggesting that being at the same latitude actually meant something (it doesn’t). You no longer hear them utter that comparison.

At present, the region is filled with confident yet humble winemakers who have a sense of history and their place within it. Many of the oldest wineries are now moving into their second generation of winemakers. They have the benefit of working with older vines and 20–50 years of experience. It was truly an energizing tour.

The Eyrie Vineyards

Any discussion about Oregon wine must start with David Lett and The Eyrie Vineyards. It all starts with “Papa Pinot,” the first visionary to recognize the area’s potential. David planted the first wine grapes in Oregon’s Dundee Hills in 1966, and Eyrie produced their first vintage in 1970. They’ve been making world-class wines for 50 years, with David’s son Jason now running the show. The old and mature



vineyards are farmed organically, yields are kept low, only native yeasts are used, and non-interventionist winemaking is employed. The result: wines that have integrity, finesse, elegance, and the age-worthiness to further the legacy of The Eyrie Vineyards.

2017 Eyrie Dundee Hills Pinot Gris (\$16.95)

2016 Eyrie Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$34.95)

Arterberry Maresh

Here’s where the history continues. David Lett convinced his friend Jim Maresh to plant the only other vineyard in the Dundee Hills (at the time). After over 30 years of growing grapes for others, Jim Jr. decided to make wine using their own-rooted, old vines. The iconic vineyard surrounding the “big red barn” with 40-year-old vines has always been farmed organically. If Oregon vineyards were classified like Burgundy, Maresh would certainly be ranked a Grand Cru. The philosophy here adheres to low alcohol (under 14%), less than 15% new oak, with no fining and filtering. Nothing added, and nothing taken away.



2017 Arterberry Maresh Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$26.99)

2017 Arterberry Maresh “Old Vine” Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$44.95)

Leah Jorgensen

One of the most intriguing visits was our morning spent with renegade winemaker Leah Jorgensen. According to Leah, she had her mid-life crisis at 26, which encouraged her to leave the tech world and dive deep into her love of wine. Her passion took her to Oregon, where she decided, to the surprise of many, to focus on the wine styles and grapes that have been made famous in the Loire Valley. Pursuant to stints working at many of the best addresses, she finally put a stake in the ground and dedicated herself to producing some of the compelling and sought-after wines in the valley. This up-and-coming “Loiregon” property is one to keep your eye on.



Oregon outlier: Leah Jorgensen shows her Loire-inspired wines.

2017 Leah Jorgensen “Tour Rain” Oregon (\$24.99)

2016 Leah Jorgensen “Côt” Rogue Valley Malbec (\$27.99)

(Continued on page 3)

Nalle: A Return to Dry Creek's Roots

By Stefanie Juelsgaard

Nalle Winery's focus on the old-school California style of winemaking establishes them as a producer to watch in Dry Creek Valley. Moderate alcohols, incredible aging potential, and concentrated old vine fruit are the hallmarks of their winemaking. Their head-trained, dry-farmed Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon wines are of unparalleled quality, and are produced in a labor-intensive manner that most California wineries wouldn't bother to undertake. Using fruit planted in 1927 on the family-owned estate, Nalle's wines are built to last, and their powerhouse structure and well-integrated acidity make them great with a meal.

The estate has been family owned for five generations, since Andrew Nalle's great-great-grandparents planted the Zinfandel vineyard in the 1920s. The winery was built in 1984 as an above-ground cave, now covered with more than 300 rosemary plants. The plants not only help to keep the winery cool, but attract bees to maintain the ecosystem of the area. With a focus on sustainability and preserving the vines for their kids, the Nalle family has given us wines unmatched in the Dry Creek Valley.

2017 Nalle Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$39.95)

A 50-50 blend of estate old vine Zinfandel and a field blend from the Bernier-Sibary vineyard (80% Zinfandel, 10% Petite Sirah, and 10% Carignane), this offers notes of cherrywood, blackberry, leather, plum, and nutmeg. The Zinfandel brings a great fruit profile, with the Petite Sirah and Carignane giving structure and length. It exhibits fine tannin, a lifted, fresh profile, and the perfect balance of fruit and herb that echoes California wines of the 1970s and 1980s.



Andrew and Doug Nalle walk the old vines in Dry Creek Valley.
(Photo: Holly Leitner)

2016 Nalle "Estate Old Vine" Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$44.95)

From 92-year-old vines on the Nalle estate planted by Lee Nalle's great-grandparents. The combination of head-trained and dry-farmed vines yields a very concentrated and intense wine. High-toned and incredibly bright, this is a dry Zin. Juicy raspberry and cherry meet fine-grained tannin and just a hint of oak. This was fermented in small open-top tanks and aged for 18 months in French oak.

2016 Nalle "Estate" Dry Creek Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$49.95)

This is the quintessential old-school Dry Creek style of Cabernet. With fine oak tannin, a long, brambly finish, and soft black fruit, this sits at a mere 13.7% alcohol. This is one that is fantastic now, but will undoubtedly age beautifully. Fans of Heitz and Corison will definitely want to pick up a bottle of this Cabernet.

(Continued from page 2)

McKinlay Vineyards

Probably the most memorable visit of our trip was our dinner and jam session with Matt and Holly Kinne. In Matt's pursuit of richly flavored wines, he only allows one cluster to ripen on each shoot. Though many might question the economics of this practice, there is no doubt about the resulting wine quality. Matt's philosophy is that Pinot at its finest is red, not black; freshly fragrant; richly



Back in the vintage of '87: Matt Kinne breaks out the good stuff.

and brightly flavored; with complexity and length. He ferments with native yeasts, ages in mostly neutral oak, and the wines are neither fined nor filtered prior to bottling. Most surprising, the wines are a veritable bargain when you consider this rigor. When asked about this, he replied, "I'll never go work the market to sell my wines. The low prices do the work for me." The man has no vanity or ego—just a passion for great wine and music.

2017 McKinlay Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$17.99)

2015 McKinlay "Special Selection" Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$36.99)

Worth a mention about Oregon wineries is their dedication to maintaining the health of their vineyards, their wines, and their place in the community. Almost all of these producers farm organically, biodynamically, or are certified L.I.V.E. (Low Input Viticulture and Enology). Also, Oregon wineries dominate the B Corps ranks, which are businesses that meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance. So, put that in your glass and drink it.



Bien Nacido Vineyard in Santa Maria Valley.

(Continued from page 1)

The majority of Bien Nacido's grapes are sold to other wineries (a veritable who's who of California winemakers). However, the Millers also produce small quantities of their own estate wines from prized parcels, under the Bien Nacido Vineyards label. With the pick of the fruit, as you might imagine, the wines are truly worthy expressions of this legendary site.

2017 Bien Nacido Estate Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay (\$39.95) This wine is defined by its wonderful cut and stony minerality that underpin flavors that range from tangy citrus, Key lime, and grapefruit, to crunchy orchard fruit like Bartlett pear and quince. The finish is saline and mouthwatering. Old vine power and concentration combine with the site's signature bright acidity. **96 WE, 93 RP**



2016 Bien Nacido Estate Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$49.95) This captures the wonderfully *sauvage*, complex, layered nature of Santa Maria Valley cool climate Pinot Noir. It has so much more than just simple fruit. There's brambly hedgerow, forest floor, smoky spices, charred meat, and dusty earth. Medium-plus-bodied, with juicy acidity and incredible length on the palate. Despite the wine's wild and savory flavor profile, the texture is silky and refined. **96 JD, 96 WE**

2014 Bien Nacido Estate "X Block" Santa Maria Valley Syrah (\$99.99) Consistently one of the best and most famous parcels of Syrah in California, Bien Nacido's X Block is a tiny, but highly sought-after planting of Syrah from 1987. The fruit is precious and is never sold to more than four different producers in a given vintage. As Antonio

Galloni says in his 96-point review of this wine, "It has a lot of everything." Very powerful, brooding and ageworthy. A truly world-class Syrah. **96 VN, 94 RP**

2016 Ann Albert "Bien Nacido Vineyard" Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay (\$29.99) Ann Albert is a personal side project from winemaking phenom Eric Johnson, of Talley Vineyards. Eric's real magic lies in his ability to make powerful, textural, concentrated Chardonnays while making sure the wines have an almost ethereal acid line and piercing minerality. Coming from I Block, planted in 1973 to Clone 5 on its own roots, this wine perfectly encapsulates Bien Nacido's powerful fruit profile, combined with racy acidity carrying saline mineral notes for perpetuity on the palate. Let it open and warm slightly in the glass for full effect. **94 JD, 93 WE**



2016 Au Bon Climat "Bien Nacido Vineyard" Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$44.95) Au Bon Climat is nearly synonymous with Bien Nacido. The winery physically sits among the vines at Bien Nacido, and winemaker Jim Clendenen has had custom blocks planted entirely for him. For many decades Jim has been an integral part of the legacy of this site. His intimate familiarity with the vineyard means his wines are some of the most highly regarded expressions of this place. The 2016 is a fairly restrained, savory expression of the site with a very "Burgundian" feel to it. Leaf litter, dried spices, leather, and dusty berry fruits. Elegant, fine tannins and a long, earthy finish. **96 VN, 93 JD**



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