

Family winery ages well, always with an eye to the future

Niven clan has left its mark on Edna Valley with quality chardonnay, a long-term vision and a knack for teamwork

By Sally Buffalo Taylor
Special to The Tribune

When cousins John H. Niven and Michael Blaney look out over the vineyards spreading south from Islay Hill, they see the past. And they see the future.

Their grandfather Jack Niven planted the vineyards 40 years ago, pioneering modern grape growing in Edna Valley. The family has been shaping the wine industry there ever since.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 32 ➤



MICHAEL BLANEY, LEFT, AND JOHN H. NIVEN at Paragon Vineyards and Orcutt Road Cellars in San Luis Obispo.

PHOTO BY JOEJOHNSTON





PHOTOS COURTESY NIVEN FAMILY

UNDATED VIEWS of Paragon Vineyards.

FROM PAGE 30

In the beginning

Rather than starting small, Niven, who had already built and sold off a successful chain of grocery stores, went big into the grape-growing business. He planted the 550-acre Paragon Vineyards in 1973 and built a good business selling grapes to wine producers.

In 1981, he began Edna Valley Vineyards in partnership with a historic Monterey County vineyard, growing it into a national brand that helped put the area on the map as a wine region before Gallo bought it two years ago.

Then Niven helped Edna Valley become a designated wine region, spearheading the effort to earn American Viticultural Area status in 1982.

While Niven focused on the large-scale business, his wife, Catherine, took on her own project, planting 3½ acres of grapes in front of their Tiffany Ranch Road home. Catherine — who grew up on her family's thoroughbred horse farm in Kentucky and owned a winning racehorse — was the first to venture into making wine, starting what would become Baileyana.

The Nivens' sons, John and James, eventually joined the family business, and with their parents, they expanded the family's vineyards to more than 1,100 acres, placing them among the largest landholders in Edna Valley. They also grew Baileyana into another national brand.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 34 ➤



PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON

PARAGON VINEYARDS today.





GRAPES ON THE VINE
at Paragon Vineyards.

PHOTO BY JOEJOHNSTON

FROM PAGE 32

A new generation

John H. Niven and Blaney, two of nine Niven grandchildren, grew up playing in the vineyards during family gatherings and holidays and working in the winery during summers. But it was never a given they would join the family business.

“Go out, spread your wings, learn life and business — on your own time,” John H. Niven, 41, recalls being told by his parents and grandparents.

He worked in commercial real estate in Northern California. Blaney, 49, was a pit boss at Circus Circus in Las Vegas. They were brought on board in 1997 — Niven as vice president of sales and marketing and Blaney as vice president of operations — allowing John and James to remain involved but step back from day-to-day operations.

It was a time of great change for the fami-

ly and the business. Jack Niven had died two years earlier. Catherine was approaching 80 and would die a couple of years later.

In the year after the third generation came on board, they took some major steps. They hired veteran winemaker Christian Roguenant, began building a state-of-the-art winery and renovated the 100-year-old Independence Schoolhouse at 5828 Orcutt Road into a new tasting room.

They have also carried on the pioneering spirit, expanding the family’s portfolio with new labels — Tangent, Trenza, Cadre and Zocker — exploring cool-climate whites not traditionally grown here, such as Spanish albariño and Austrian grüner veltliner, as well as distinct regional blends.

“They are really pushing the envelope as far as showcasing the diversity and dynamics of what can be grown in the region,” said Heather Muran, executive director of the San Luis Obispo Wine Country Association.

Now Niven and Blaney are returning to Edna Valley’s roots for their newest, biggest launch — a chardonnay called True Myth that the family hopes will become a household name. Like their grandfather before them, they are going big, producing more than 13,000 cases — more than double their primary Baileyana chardonnay, Grand Firepeak Cuvee — and bringing their total production to 50,000 cases.

“Chardonnay is the mothership here,” John H. Niven said. “Edna Valley is truly a real special place on this entire planet to grow chardonnay.”

Sharing the wealth

The family’s fortune has rippled across the region. Its success has spurred the success of Edna Valley overall, including many smaller wineries along the area’s wine trail.

“Through the years, they have really

CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE ➤



PHOTOS COURTESY NIVEN FAMILY
JACK NIVEN IN THE EARLY DAYS: Above, on an all-terrain vehicle in the fields. Center, a proud Niven with one of his newly planted vines. Far right, enjoying the fruits of his labor.



FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

worked to bring awareness to the region as a whole, not just for their brand, but for the entire growing region, really putting it on the map,” Muran said.

Jean-Pierre Wolff, who with his wife owns the 125-acre Wolff Vineyards a half-mile from the Nivens’ tasting room, noted that

they benefit from having “some larger key players in the area, because they have the financial resources to have more money spent on marketing and promotion both locally and nationally.”

The Nivens have grown, Wolff said, but they are still a family company — and still pioneers.

“They try new things, and they are always

looking at what’s happening in other parts of the world and trying to learn from it and bring some of those lessons learned here,” Wolff said. “So you have a combination of good, strong business leadership, but also a family touch.”

Plus they are simply good neighbors, Wolff

CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE ➤

Shoes for the Entire Family



Clarks Roar



Dakota



Bailey Button Triplet



Ariat Fat Baby Boot

This Fall
Great Selection!

- New Styles
- Great Accessories
- Lots of Socks

Mike's Shoes
 MENS & WOMENS

SLO Promenade • Suite 3 Across from Forever 21 • San Luis Obispo



547-9593

Mon-Sat 10am - 6pm
 Sun 12pm - 5pm
 Open 7 Days A Week

Your Biggest Handicap Just Might Be Your Body!



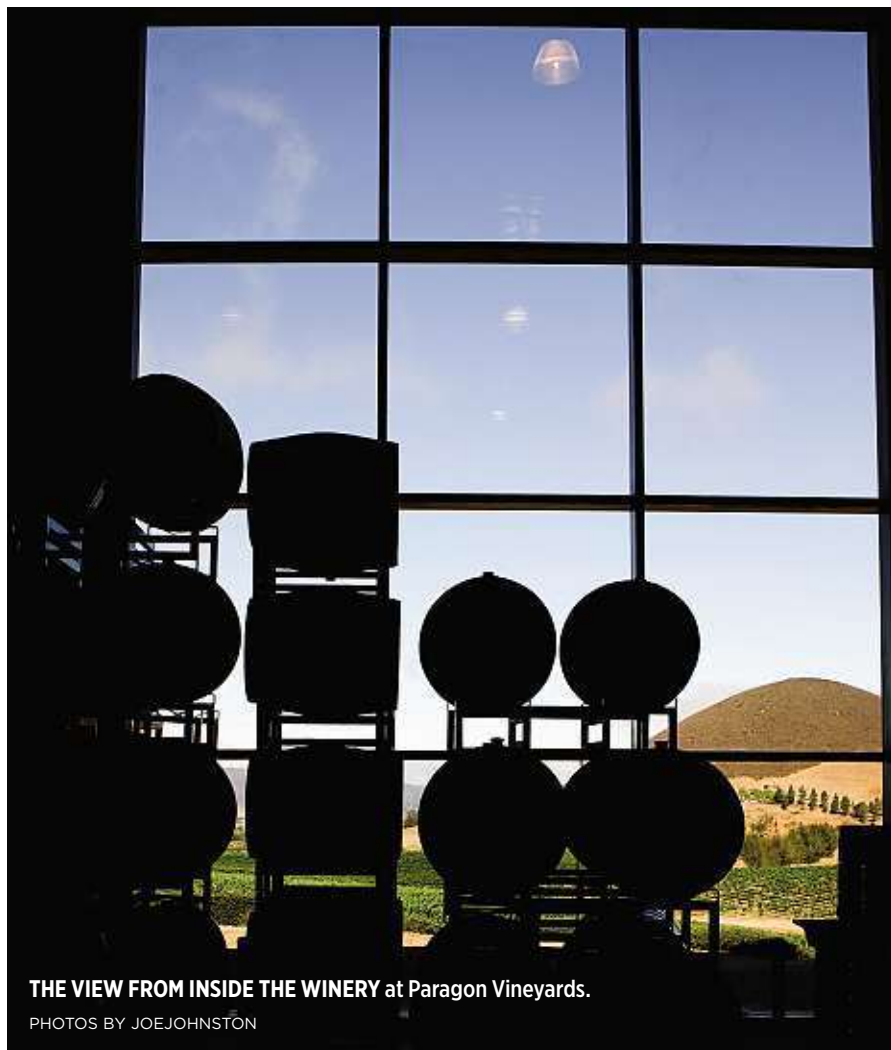
One month of personalized sports training:
 flexibility, cardio, strength, power, speed, accuracy
 balance, agility, coordination, stamina.

Sports Fitness Package Special - \$197 (Reg. \$544)



For more info go to:
www.AthlonElite.com

805 Aerovista Pl. Suite 104 • SLO
805-546-6070



THE VIEW FROM INSIDE THE WINERY at Paragon Vineyards.

PHOTOS BY JOEJOHNSTON



THE NIVENS' NEWEST WINE, True Myth chardonnay.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

added, only instead of asking to borrow a cup of sugar, it's to borrow some filter pads or a truck for the day when something breaks down.

"We do this for each other. It's a collaboration throughout the valley," Wolff said. Plus, the area would not succeed as a wine region with only one or two wineries. "We need each other."

John H. Niven echoed that sentiment. "We're all in this together."

A new direction forward

That may be the case when it comes to Edna Valley, but the Nivens have developed a more go-it-alone attitude when it comes to producing their wine. Partnerships were not working out.

Six years into a joint venture with the Australian producer of Penfolds and Lindeman's to produce a wine called Seven

Peaks, the partner pulled out after merging with another large Australian corporation.

Two years later, in 2005, their initial partner in Edna Valley Vineyards, Chalone Vineyards near Pinnacles, was bought. Its new owner, Diageo, had other priorities and wanted out. And when Gallo came along in 2011, it sought full ownership.

The Nivens have long-term contracts to sell Paragon grapes to Edna Valley Vineyards, and Jack Niven's name remains on the winery's iconic tasting room.

Still, John H. Niven said, "It was the hardest decision the family has had to make."

But the sale also bolstered the family's long-term evolution from growers with an established vineyard to estate producers making more of their own wine.

"It's about putting more of our fruit in the bottle," Blaney said. "That's really where the growth lies, in making more wine from our own vineyard."

Right now, 35 to 40 percent of the grapes are going into their own bottles. They aim to grow that percentage.

But for the Nivens, even the future lies in the past.

"Our grandparents say they built the vineyards for our generation. Our parents expanded on that, building the winery and so on and so forth, saying they are doing it for our kids' generation. And we expand the brand, kick off True Myth — we're doing things for our kids' kids," Niven said.

"Our family is very long-term minded. We're always thinking generations ahead."

Blaney plays it cooler. "We're just really good at putting teams together and using the resources of the family."

He often asks himself: "How would I leave this better than I found it?"

"It's all about sustainability and passing it on to the next generation." 🐦

MORE ON PAGE 38 ➤

The Nivens' wide-ranging wine portfolio



Baileyana

Classic Edna Valley varietals — chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah — with some smaller-case variations available from the tasting room. \$28-\$30 per bottle.



Trenza

Blends of cool-climate Spanish varietals from Edna Valley with the warmer-climate Spanish varietals from Paso Robles. Name means “braid” in Spanish.

Blanco, Tinto and Rosado. \$17-\$30 per bottle.



Zocker

German/Austrian cool-climate whites. The grüner veltliner recently beat out dozens of Austrian and German grüners in a series of blind tastings in Europe. Name means “Gambler” in Austrian.

Grüner veltliner and riesling. \$20 per bottle.

Tangent

Alternative cool-climate whites, including some varietals with little exposure outside their mother countries. Stainless steel fermenting, screw-cap tops, a focus on freshness. Albariño, grenache blanc, pinot gris, viognier and sauvignon blanc. \$10-14 per bottle.



Cadre

A Central Coast uber-pinot noir, blending pinot grapes from historic vineyards in the region's four American Viticultural Areas — Santa Rita Hills (La Encantada), Santa Maria Valley (Bien Nacido), Arroyo Grande Valley (Laetitia) and Edna Valley (Firepeak).

Pinot noir. \$50 per bottle.



True Myth

Showcases the essence of Edna Valley chardonnay in a wine positioned for everyday drinking. Will showcase Paso Robles cabernet sauvignon with a release next year.

Chardonnay, with a cabernet sauvignon to come. \$18 per bottle.



Niven winery facts and personnel



TASTING

Taste a range of wines from the Nivens' full portfolio in a historic old schoolhouse-turned-tasting room at the heart of the Edna Valley wine trail. Make use of the many outdoor chairs and tables and take in a game of bocce ball or just enjoy the views over the Paragon and Firepeak vineyards.

5828 Orcutt Road, San Luis Obispo • Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily

\$8 for standard tasting; \$12 reserve tasting; \$5-10 wines by the glass; \$12-50 bottles
nivenfamilywines.com • truemythwinery.com



WINEMAKER

Christian Rougenant first made chardonnay and pinot noir in the Burgundy area of France where he was born and raised among the vines. He has gone on to make wine on five continents, including the official sparkling wine for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. His experience includes time at one of the premier Champagne houses in France and as winemaker at Maison Deutz/Laetitia Winery. He has been with the Nivens for 14 years.



VINEYARD MANAGER

George Donati, who has managed the Nivens' vineyards for 20 years, was honored in July as Wine Grape Grower of the Year by the San Luis Obispo County Wine Industry Awards.

Last year, his company, Pacific Vineyard Company, received the Green Award from the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce for its environmental stewardship.

SUSTAINABILITY

The Nivens and their vineyard management company, Pacific Vineyard Company, were part of the pilot project for the Sustainability In Practice program, and their vineyards were among the first to receive SIP certification by the Central Coast Vineyard Team. The designation requires an extensive audit of farming practices and environmental stewardship but also takes into account equitable treatment of employees and community involvement. The program began in San Luis Obispo County but has been spreading to Monterey, Napa and Sonoma wineries.

The family has long used sustainable practices, Vice President of Sales and Marketing John H. Niven says, and had to change very little to get the designation.

“But we’ve definitely learned by cooperating with all the vineyards that were involved in the program,” Vice President of Operations Michael Blaney adds. “You all learn from each other a little bit, a trick here or there where you can use something that’s more sustainable.”

The certification standards address biodiversity, social equity, community involvement, energy efficiency, pest management, air quality, water quality and conservation and risk reduction. A few highlights of the Nivens' practices:

- **Water conservation:** Avoiding over-watering by controlling irrigation based on evapotranspiration, the rate that water returns to the atmosphere through evaporation from the soil and transpiration from the plants.
- **Energy conservation and efficiency:** Tractors perform up to four tasks in one pass to reduce use of fuel and soil compaction.
- **Pest management:** They control problem pests with natural predators whenever possible, for example using beetles known as mealybug destroyers to combat mealybugs. They have virtually eliminated the use of highly toxic Category 1 pesticides and have installed raptor boxes to encourage owls and hawks to hunt for rodent pests.