

# EDNA VALLEY VINEYARD:



Above, John Niven represents the second of three generations of the Niven family that have farmed winegrapes in the Edna Valley

At right: The tasting room at Edna Valley Vineyard has become a Central Coast showcase for the winery.

PHOTOS BY K. BUDGE

# Celebrating a quarter century



One of the most popular wineries on the Central Coast celebrates a milestone anniversary.

By Katy Budge

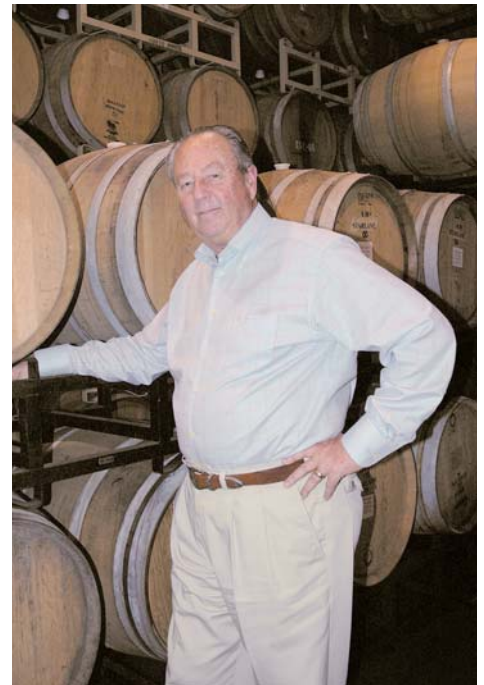
This year marks the 25th anniversary of Edna Valley Vineyard, so we took this opportunity to sit down with John Niven and discuss the history of his family's long involvement in the Edna Valley Vineyard and in the Edna Valley wine industry.

The Niven family's first exposure to the world of wine grapes came in the 1960s when they became silent partners in vineyard operations in the Santa Maria and Monterey County areas. As John Niven remembered, "that's when my dad (Jack Niven) fell in love with the business. He decided he really wanted to get serious and start a vineyard from scratch."

At the time, the California wine industry was in its infancy, and "nobody really had any experience," but the elder Niven hired two viticulturists from Fresno and Davis and charged them with determining the optimum areas for winegrowing. They traversed up and down the Central Coast, and independently, they both came up with the Edna Valley. They surmised that because its unique east-west orientation funnels directly to the ocean, it would prove a perfect climate for grapes that favor temperate environments.

Armed with that knowledge, Jack Niven

NEXT PAGE >



The view from the wine bar at Edna Valley Vineyard, top.

Above: John Niven in the barrel room.

PHOTOS BY K. BUDGE



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The Niven family also owns and operates the Baileyana label, with a tasting room is located on Orcutt Road in San Luis Obispo. For more information, call 805-269-8200, or log onto [www.baileyana.com](http://www.baileyana.com).

#### FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

established Paragon Vineyard Co. in the early 1970s, and planted 550 acres of grapes in the Edna Valley. Though some of the varietals proved not to be as well suited to the climate as others, the operation was an overall success – at least from a farming perspective.

“We found ourselves with a lot of grapes, but no place to go with them,” said John Niven. “The Edna Valley was unheard of then. The Central Coast was unheard of then.” However, in the spring of 1977, the Nivens were approached by Phil Woodward and Dick Graff of Chalone Wine Group, a meeting that would arguably prove to be one of the most successful partnerships in the California wine industry.

“They had just constructed their winery,” said Niven, “but that was a drought year in California and they had no grapes.” The Nivens entered into a handshake agreement with Chalone, and provided fruit for the 1977-79 harvests. In 1980, they made it official, and

Edna Valley Vineyard was born as a 50-50 partnership between the Nivens/Paragon Vineyard and Chalone Wine Group, which was a publicly-held company. Essentially, the Nivens controlled the land and the vineyards, and the new joint venture owned the brand and the winemaking equipment -- a situation that still remains in effect with the recent Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines’ acquisition of Chalone.

Throughout the 1980s, both the Edna Valley Vineyard brand and the Nivens’ vineyard interests continued to grow. On the vineyard side, the Nivens opted to create Pacific Vineyard Company, a farming entity responsible for the day-to-day vineyard operations. On the winery side, Edna Valley Vineyard was now being distributed nationally, and it seemed the perfect time to significantly ramp up the hospitality side of the business.

“We had started tasting basically with a sheet of plywood on some barrels – like so many others did,” said Niven. “In the mid 1980s, we had selected a site and began plan-

ning for a tasting facility. We got as far as burying the utilities, but then came the start of one of the deep downward cycles in the wine industry. In 1996, we finally got around to finishing what we had started.”

As most locals and many visitors know, the Edna Valley Vineyard facility is among the most popular tasting rooms in the county, boasting impressive views of the surrounding vineyards, an extensive gift shop, on-site catering capacity, and the ability to host events ranging from an intimate gathering to a party of 200. Today, it’s the benchmark for tasting rooms; at the time, it was a questionable undertaking, but one significantly supported by Chalone.

As Niven recalled, “Phil Woodward said, ‘We want to have a significant presence here – you figure out what it will be.’ It was really kind of a gamble, a pretty big gamble. There was nothing here like that, like what they had in Napa, but we felt we could do it. We really

**NEXT PAGE** ➤

stretched the envelope, but right from the beginning, it was successful.” Unfortunately, Niven’s father passed away in 1995, and never got to see the finished facility, which opened in 1997 and was named the “Jack Niven Hospitality Center” in his honor.

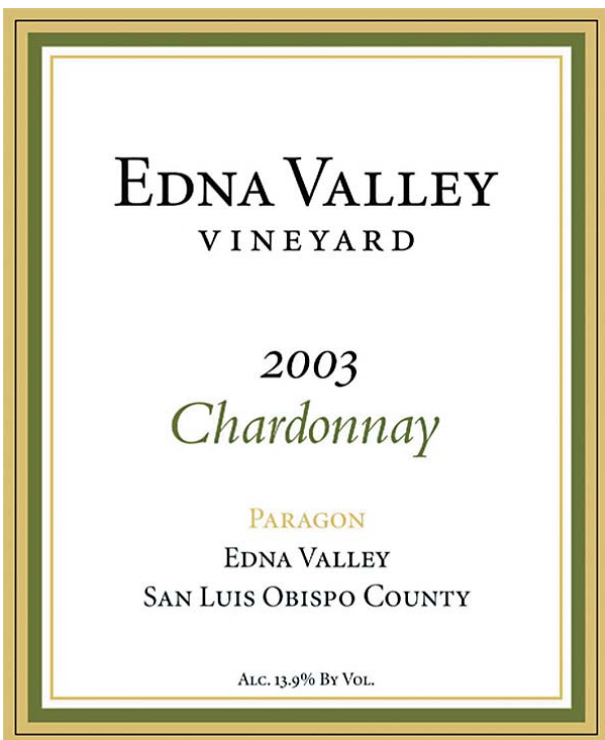
Over the years, the Nivens have also developed other wine-related businesses, such as Orcutt Road Cellars -- a custom facility for about 20 customers as well as the home of Baileyana, a wine label founded by Catharine Niven some two decades ago and now being managed by the third generation of the family. In the 1990s, the Nivens also entered into a partnership with Australian wine giant Southcorp to develop the now defunct Seven Peaks label. Recently, the longtime affiliation with Chalone took on a different twist when that company and its holdings – including a half interest in the Edna Valley Vineyard – were bought by Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines, but Niven is nothing but positive about the future.

“Chalone worked far better than anyone’s expectations, and Diageo brings a whole other level in its capacity to distribute, and that’s the name of the game these days. Essentially, we can have our cake and eat it too: we’re able to partner with these companies and still maintain our family business. We’ve always viewed ourselves as farmers, and there was a great amount of security in having a place for our grapes to go. It was always attractive to us, and we had an attractive attribute ourselves in our stability.”

Indeed, the Niven family is now three generations deep in the Edna Valley wine industry, and currently operates some 1200 acres of vineyards in the area – either through outright ownership or hands-on lease arrangements. As John Niven explained, “our partners may change from time to time, but we’re not going anywhere.”

Edna Valley Vineyards is located at 2585 Biddle Ranch Road in San Luis Obispo. For more information call 805-544-5855, or log onto [www.ednavalley.com](http://www.ednavalley.com).

**NEXT PAGE: A PROFILE ON EDNA VALLEY VINEYARD WINEMAKER HARRY HANSEN**



*At a glance*

**A Quarter Century at Edna Valley Vineyard:**

- 1970's:** Paragon Vineyard is established by the first generation of the Niven Family -- Jack and Catharine
- 1973:** 550 acres of grapes are planted to Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Johannisberg Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Gamay Beaujolais, Sauvignon Blanc, and Merlot
- 1977:** The Nivens are approached by Phil Woodward and Dick Graff of the Chalone Wine Group; a handshake agreement results in Paragon providing grapes to Chalone for the next three harvests.
- 1980:** Edna Valley American Viticulture Area (AVA) approved
- 1980:** Edna Valley Vineyard is created as a 50-50 partnership between Dick Graff and Phil Woodward of the Chalone Wine Group and the Niven Family of Paragon Vineyards
- 1980:** The first vintage of Edna Valley Vineyard -- 700 cases of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir – is produced.
- 1986:** First tasting room is built.
- 1987:** National distribution of the Edna Valley Vineyard brand begins.
- 1990:** Case production has increased from 7000 in 1980 to 50,000.
- 1990:** 170 acres of additional Chardonnay are planted by Paragon.
- 1995:** The second generation of the Niven family – John and Jim Niven – becomes involved in the operations of Paragon Vineyard.
- 1997:** Paragon plants the Firepeak vineyard with new clones of Pinot Noir.
- 1997-2000:** Pinot Gris, Viognier and Syrah are planted.
- 1997:** The Jack Niven Hospitality Center opens, and the Club Edna wine club debuts.
- 2000:** Case production has increased from 50,000 in 1990 to 100,000.
- 2002:** The third generation of the Niven Family -- John H. Niven and Michael Blaney – becomes involved in vineyard operations.
- 2005:** Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines acquires the holdings of Chalone Wine Group, including the 50 percent interest of Edna Valley Vineyard.
- 2005:** Case production tops 200,000, 60 percent of which is Chardonnay.