

## PSYCHOLOGICAL RIPENESS

BY ROD SMITH

In football, hang time is the amount of time a kick hangs in the air. The term came into popular use during the 1980s, when networks began displaying a timer every time the ball was kicked. Invariably, while the ball was in the air and the seconds ticked off, sportscaster John Madden would deliver a little chalk-talk about how long hang time can win a game.

In viticulture, hang time is the amount of time grapes are allowed — by growers and the weather — to hang on the vine after achieving nominal ripeness. The term came into popular use in northern California in the late 1980s, during a time when people in the San Francisco Bay Area, including many who normally don't pay any attention to sports, spent a good part of every Sunday cheering for the great Joe Montana-led San Francisco Forty-Niners. I

was writing a wine column for the San Francisco Chronicle in the late '80s, and just about every press release in the wine world crossed my desk. Suddenly, it seemed, the chatter from publicists was all about hang time and its heavier-sounding corollary, physiological ripeness.

Coincidence or connection? In any case, the term "hang time" is peculiar to the California wine industry. As Dr. Richard Smart, the "flying vine doctor" and author of the influential book, "Sunlight Into Wine," wrote last year in a technical publication, "Hang time is a California derived term. I forget when I first heard it, maybe ten years ago. Now it is commonly used in California but does not seem to have been widely picked up elsewhere."

By the early '90s it was practically axiomatic in the California wine world that hang time is essential to producing outstanding wine. The concept had taken on a life of its own, exerting a substantial impact on the overall character of California wine — most obviously in the fact that California wines now routinely exceed the alcohol level of European table wines by two percentage points or more.

It's impacted grape growers, too. Hang time lowers the weight of the crop by dehydration, which means a grower being paid by the ton loses money with every day of hang time. And many growers have come to believe that hang time has a negative impact on the vine's long-term ability to set and ripen economical crops.

In fact, the idea that delaying the harvest produces better wine is increasingly controversial. The notion of physiological ripeness as a separate function from normal fruit maturity has yet to be corroborated by the scientific community.

Richard Smart is one of the most vocal critics of hang time. At a conference on hang time in Napa Valley early this year, Dr. Smart delivered a presentation titled, "Two Myths: Physiological Ripeness

and Hang Time," in which he asserted that the value of hang time is in winemakers' imaginations. "What we're really talking about is psychological ripeness," he declared.

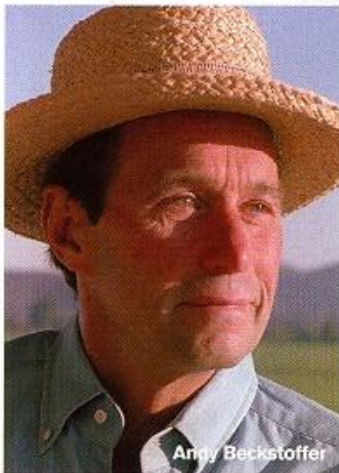
The conference was organized by independent grower Andy Beckstoffer and presented by the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association. The object, said Beckstoffer, was to open a dialogue about hang time and the issues associated with it. "There was talk all through the land, in the coffee shops," he explained. "I wanted to raise the level of that conversation to a professional level, and set the basis for further conversation."

Beckstoffer is no stranger to controversy. He has single-handedly revolutionized the business of growing grapes, or, as he puts it, "making a living from grape growing." He was the first major grower to insist

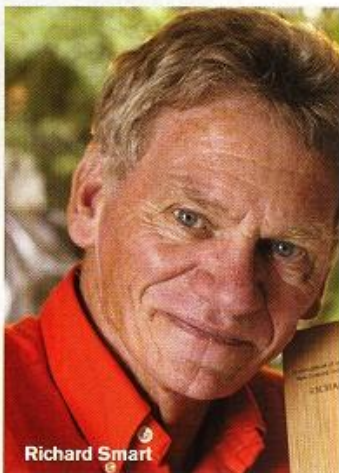
on the price of his grapes being tied to the bottle price of wine made from them; the widespread adoption of his formula (price per ton equals 100 times bottle price) over the past few years has given growers an equitable share of wine profits for the first time in history.

Beckstoffer's conference, sponsored by the Napa Valley Grape-growers, drew more than 600 people. In addition to Dr. Smart, UC Davis weighed in with two professors and a distinguished alumnus in the private sector. Linda Bisson, Professor and Maynard Amerine Endowed Chair, went "In Search of Optimal Grape Maturity," (with little immediately practical success); Andrew Walker, Professor and Chair, Horticulture & Agronomy Graduate Group, addressed "Hang Time's Potential Impact on Vine Health," (negligible, he said, but several growers challenged him from the floor). And Nick Dokoozlian, now Vice President of Viticulture, E&J Gallo Winery, spoke on "Physiology of Extended Berry Maturation," (like Bisson, he's unable to say how, or even if, hang time actually works). And Beringer-Blass vice president for vineyard operations Robert Steinhauer talked about "Winegrowing for Desirable Flavors," (the riper the better, he said, adding that consumers continue to support high-alcohol wines).

There were no hard and fast conclusions from the conference. But as Beckstoffer noted, "We've opened the dialogue and brought these issues out in the open." And many attendees felt that by the close of the session the writing was on the wall for wine producers. Knowing Beckstoffer's track record as a successful advocate for growers, they must all know in their hearts that they will soon be paying for hang time. And the longer the controversy hangs in the air, the more weight the growers will be able to bring to bear on their side — which may prove to have a significant effect on the character of California wines in the future. ■



Andy Beckstoffer



Richard Smart