

Growing Pattern Knowledge Important to Grape Growers

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“MICROCOSM,” explains the dictionary, is “a little world; a world in miniature.”

Just as the Golden State is a microcosm of the nation, so Napa Valley’s rolling vineyard region is a little world surrounded by California’s many other worlds in miniature – each with distinct ecological and climatic characteristics.

And while this may smack of esoteric discussion, Andrew Beckstoffer will tell you the concept can spell economic success or failure to grape growers.

Head of the Napa Valley Vineyard Company, a firm which manages and farms 2,000 acres of local vineyards, Beckstoffer is a proponent of the microcosm approach to agriculture.

"In the grape business today, we don't know what will grow effectively until we plant it," said Beckstoffer, explaining that modern vineyard technology is young. "It requires a knowledge of the growing pattern of the area...It's not enough just to know — for example — that it's cooler in Carneros than Calistoga."

Specific knowledge of climatic and soil conditions, coupled with Napa Valley know-how is the basis for the technical side of the company's contract farming vineyard management program.

To provide that important "custom" touch, the firm boasts a staff of professionals, each with expertise in a particular Napa Valley microcosm. For example, there's Roy Harris of Calistoga, vice president for vineyard operations and general manager; vineyard manager Bob Steinhaur of St. Helena and Joaquin Villanueva of Rutherford.

Moving south down the valley, the firm turns to Steve Yates for advice on Yountville and looks toward Ronald Lopolo when it comes to quirks of the country around Napa itself. In the Carneros region, expertise is provided by Kirby Quaschnick and Frank Villanueva.

I believe that vineyard management decisions must be based on first-hand knowledge of local conditions together with a personal understanding growers needs," said Beckstoffer, who



late last year purchased the assets of Vinifera Development Corporation and established the Napa Valley Vineyard Company.

But Beckstoffer is quick to point out that while field work and technical aspects of grape growing cannot be overemphasized there is yet another necessary ingredient for a successful operation — sound, cost-conscious management.

Among the management tools he uses in business planning are annual operating budgets, month-by-month activity reports and up-to-date cash expenditure information.

Beckstoffer warns that it takes a balanced mix of good business methods and grower expertise to make any modern farming operation profitable, and says he is skeptical when these come from outside the region.

"We actually believe you can't run Napa County farms from the outside," he explained. "In the long run, corporate farming is inefficient. "I'm talking about large farming — not the family operation."

He contends one major problem of small farmers — and probably a contributing factor to their lack of success — is an inability to combine modern technology with sound business practices.

"We might come up with an idea that looks good economically, but it never goes unless it works out at the farm level," he said. Conversely, many ideas that look good in the field, when later studied prove to be unworkable economically.

"The business you see today is going to be different than the business you see 10 years from now," says Beckstoffer. "We're at the top (in Napa Valley). The character of our product carries right on to the consumer. . . .it requires involvement. We can't afford to produce bad fruit or allow anyone else to produce bad fruit."

Roy Harris, chief of vineyard operations for the firm agrees. He sees many changes on the horizon for grape growers, and says Napa Valley growers and winemakers must stay on the top of the technology revolution if they are to maintain the current image of premium wine excellence.

"Half of the plantings today will probably be redeveloped over the next five-10 years as the new grapes come in," said Harris as he explained the shift from standard to premium grapes which many major wineries in the valley are now demanding.

"It's a business where a man can still express himself...," said Harris "In Napa Valley the winemaker takes the grape and helps it become what it was supposed to be."

Forecasting increased interaction between growers and winemakers to insure that the needs of both are met, Harris said new technology will help growers produce the quality and quantity of grape required for premium wines. "We do practical technical research in areas such as vine spacing, drip irrigation and frost protection in the field — not in the laboratory," Harris added.

Asked about the future of Napa Valley wines and their ability to successfully compete with European vintners, Beckstoffer stressed the need to maintain high standards. "It's easy to get somebody to buy a bum product once, but all the marketing in the world won't get him to buy it twice."

"I'll make you a bet," said Beckstoffer, "that by 1980 there will be more Napa Valley wine consumed in central France than Bordeaux (wines) in Napa Valley."