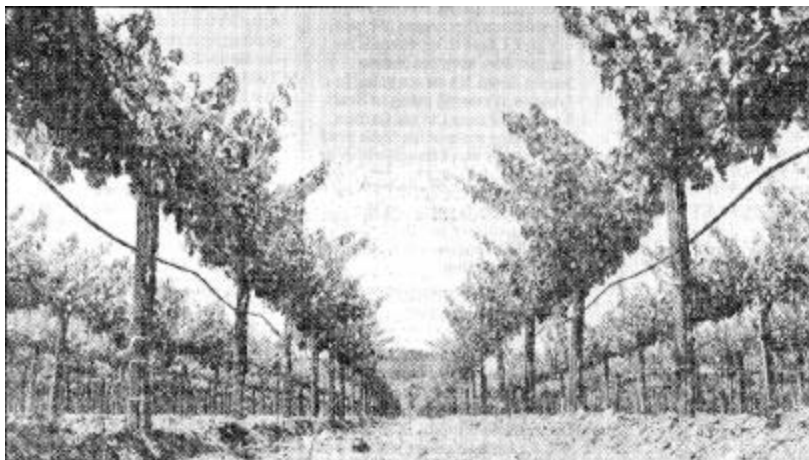


Greatness Starts on the Grapevine

BY LARRY WALKER

It's that simple. You want good wine, start with good grapes. Most winemakers in California (and elsewhere) realize that. Experts say that the major developments in winemaking over the next decade will begin in the vineyard, not in the winery. More than ever, winemakers and grape growers are beginning to work together.



The growers who care about what they are growing are determined to produce better grapes for better wine. And the winery owners who care about their product will work with the growers.

Such joint efforts can be seen at the upcoming Napa Valley Wine Auction (June 18 through 20) in a contribution by Warren Winiarski from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars. Three large etched bottles of Chardonnay will be offered to bidders. They are the first in a series of Stag's Leap Chardonnay from vineyards in the Carneros district of Napa. But not just any vineyards: In the wine description in the auction catalog it is pointed out that these wines are Beckstoffer Vineyard-designated.

Those vineyards are part of over 3,000 acres of grapes owned or managed by Andy Beckstoffer in Napa and Mendocino counties. Beckstoffer is a Napa farmer who has an MBA from Dartmouth, and the way he runs vineyards is good enough to have his grapes bought by a virtual who's who of California wineries: Beaulieu, Stag's Leap, Schug Cellars, Cakebread, Beringer, Sam Sebastiani, William Hill, Domaine Mumm, Simi, Parducci, Fetzer, Obester and Scharffenberger, among many others.

A Growing Trend

Vineyard-designated wines are not new, but they are becoming more and more important. Belvedere Winery in Sonoma County was a pioneer in the concept with wines from Winery Lake vineyards, from Robert Young Vineyards, from Bacigalupi Vineyards, all released over the past decade.

Chateau St. Jean has also been instrumental in establishing the vineyard-designated concept with its series of outstanding Chardonnays and Sauvignons Blanc.

"I believe the vineyard-designed concept is as important as estate-bottled," Beckstoffer said. What is it about Beckstoffer grapes that make them so much in demand?

Again, the answer is pretty simple. Beckstoffer works to deliver the best quality grapes he can, beginning with the basics of agricultural techniques through the more sophisticated measures that winemakers are demanding.

Among other things, Beckstoffer Vineyards pioneered close spacing programs for vines, breaking away from traditional spacing. Beckstoffer made spacing decisions based on the variety of the grape, soil, micro-climate and other factors affecting the final grape quality.

Traditional California spacing is 8x12, which allows 454 vines per acre. This was established 25 to 30 years ago, largely as a convenience for the movement of tractors, etc., through the vineyards.

Beckstoffer has experimented with spacings of 6x10, 8x10 and 7x11, allowing more vines per acre. Others – Robert Mondavi among them – have put vines on such close spacing that more than 2,000 vines per acre are planted.

The purpose of such dense spacing is not to produce more grapes, because it doesn't. There are more vines, but in such crowded conditions, each vine produces a smaller yield, so there may be very little difference in harvest between an acre of grapes with 454 vines and an acre of grapes with 2,000 vines. And it is much more expensive to plant, cultivate, prune and otherwise take care of 2,000 vines to an acre. Why do it? Winemakers believe it makes better wine, wine with more intensity of flavor, richer fruit flavors.

Controlling Sunshine

Beckstoffer (and others) are also experimenting with different systems of trellising the vines in an attempt to control the amount of sunlight reaching the grapes, the amount of moisture and air circulation. Different trellising systems affect different grape varieties in different ways. All of these systems require additional labor, which makes the grapes more expensive. But winemakers want it, so growers who care are doing it.

One example of an experiment by Beckstoffer just getting underway is harvesting by hand at night. Harvesting at night is nothing new. The grapes are cooler and don't tend to build up sugars or rot so quickly after harvest. But it has always been done with machines. Beckstoffer feels that certain grapes, especially Chardonnay, should not be harvested by machine because of damage to the grapes. Instead, beginning this fall in selected vineyards, he will bring in specially trained crews of pickers, working under batteries of high intensity lights.

"Sure it's going to cost more," he said. "In fact, it will cost about \$200 an acre more, but people who take a long-term view of things will be willing to pay that cost."

Many of these changes in the vineyard are more costly, at least in the development period – more costly both to the winery buying the grapes and, of course, to the consumer buying the wine. On the evidence at hand, consumers seem willing to pay more, if they are convinced the quality is there.

Beckstoffer, perhaps with the consumer's checkbook as well as his own in mind, sees not only the production of wine as a joint venture but also the sale of the end product. "If you buy grapes from us, we'll help you sell the wine," he said.

And that could be the bottom line that would convince a lot of winery owners to do business with growers like Andy Beckstoffer. As the designed vineyard label becomes more prominent, more consumers are going to recognize that the source of the grapes is perhaps as important as who made the wine. It is perfectly reasonable that at a public tasting, the winemaker and the grape grower should be pouring side by side. After all, it took both of them to make the wine.