

DAN BERGER'S WINE CELLAR

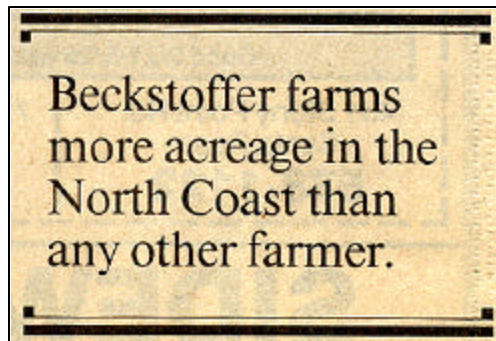
More than a gentleman farmer

Most successful wine grape growers got into the business because they knew farming and they could coax a recalcitrant vine to yield a great wine.

Yet over the last decade, there have been untold stories of family vineyards under financial seige, of crops being left on the vine for lack of a buyer, of prices so unstable that growers made only a modest return on investment, if any at all.

In some cases, these tales of woe are irrespective of the quality of the wine the grower produced.

Then there is the case of the engineer who earned a master's in business administration at Dartmouth, moved to the Napa Valley to put together a business deal, did some analysis, discovered that growers didn't know the first thing about marketing their products, and leaped into the premium side of the business based on research that showed a grand future for those who did things right.



That sounds like a fairy tale, but in fact it's the story, briefly, of Andy Beckstoffer, one of the North Coast's most successful wine grape growers — and one of its most innovative.

Among the properties that have bought and continue to buy Beckstoffer vineyard grapes are Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Sam Sebastiani, Acacia, Mondavi, Simi, Parducci, Raymond and at least a dozen others. But the Beckstoffer name isn't as well known as that of Robert Young in the Alexander Valley or Rene di Rosa of the

Winery Lake Vineyard in the Carneros.

That's because Beckstoffer thinks of himself first as a businessman, and selling quality grapes across a broad spectrum of fronts (2 ½ dozen different varieties from many different growing regions) is more important than acquiring a famous name.

Also, Beckstoffer is an engineer by training and a marketing expert by feel, and as such the quality of the fruit, he feels, is more important than such considerations as name on wine labels (although that is about to change).

Beckstoffer has been low-key about his background, and thus never trumpeted the fact that he is as much an agronomist as wine grape grower. Nor has he revealed that he was among the pioneers in wine industry drip irrigation, closer vine spacing, trellising, pest control and other scientific developments.

Today, Beckstoffer farms more acreage in the North Coast than any other farmer. His own Napa Valley vineyards total 2,355 acres, and he farms 3,366 more. In Mendocino county, he owns 1,035 acres of vineyard land. His

own vineyards sold more than 10,000 tons of grapes last year.

Success, he said, is part luck and part homework.

"I did try to buy the best vineyard land; I tried not to buy any 'deals.' But I also saw that the premium end of the business was going to be successful, and I gambled that I could make it in the premium market."

One factor that persuaded him was that, in 1973 when he acquired his first vineyard, "you didn't have to worry about selling it (grapes) all to one guy (who could control the market). There were a whole lot of small buyers, who would compete with one another."

Nor did he gamble that one or two varieties would flourish, and try to outguess the public.

"I planted many different varieties. I may not ever have sold a lot of grapes for the most money (in a region), but I don't think I ever sold a lot of grapes for the smallest amount, either." He said that for every lot of grapes a grower sells for \$1,500 a ton there will be lots that sell for \$300.

"I'd rather get a good price for everything I sell," he said. "I'd rather get above the North Coast average for everything."

Someone who tends more than 6,700 acres of vineyard land clearly can assess the state of premium vineyard land in California, and in a wide-ranging interview, Beckstoffer gave his candid evaluation of the current state of wine grapes, variety by variety.

Chardonnay: "Our most successful white variety, when it's grown in the proper locations, but cheap Chardonnay is going to go away." He said the pop-premium Chardonnays we have seen selling for \$4 to \$5 a bottle soon will be \$6 to \$7.

Johannisberg Riesling: "The vintners killed it. They made it too sweet and it didn't go with food and the consumer rejected it." He said he didn't feel Riesling would ever again be an important variety in California, which is sad because it makes such a delightful lighter-styled wine.

Sauvignon Blanc: "It has been made unpalatably grassy." He said it needs to have a moderating influence, even if blended with Chenin Blanc or some other variety to reduce the grassiness.

Zinfandel: "It has been made too inky. But it makes a wonderful red wine," and he anticipated a resurgence for it as a red wine when the White Zinfandel craze wanes.

Cabernet Sauvignon: "It's in short supply because nobody has planted Cabernet for a while. That means that the lower-end of the market, the inexpensive Cabernets we have seen, won't be that cheap any more."

Gewurztraminer: "It makes a wonderful wine, but nobody buys it except in tasting rooms. With most people (winemakers), it gets lost in the blends."

Pinot Noir: "Here you have a double bet. It's a good plant for lighter-styled red wines in some areas — because people still want something drinkable when it's young and fresh. But it's also a good grape for champagne." He said when grown in the right microclimates, such as Sebastopol, it can make an excellent red wine.

Of the other varieties, Beckstoffer still sees a definite need, for those wineries who need Petite Sirah to blend into other wines to make them better, for wineries who need Semillon to improve their Sauvignon Blancs.

Beckstoffer came to the Napa Valley in 1966 as director of long-range planning and manager of acquisition analysis with United Vintners and was president of Vinifera Development Corp., a Heublein subsidiary, from 1970 to 1973.

He bought Vinifera from Heublein in 1973 as well as its subsidiaries, Napa Valley Vineyard Co. and Mendocino Vineyard Co.

"It seemed to me that California could produce premium wine and that the wine market would grow," he said. "But I viewed the industry as moving toward segmentation, the way the beer market is."

He said the only innovation in the beer industry in the last 50 years is in packaging, but wine makers are constantly improving and upgrading various wine types, and he noted that segmentation is finally moving into the wine industry "as new products become more acceptable."

He pointed out that wine coolers, generic jug wines, White Zinfandel, sparkling wine products, and other such "niche" products are the rudiments of wine industry segmentation.

Soon, the Beckstoffer name will begin appearing on wine labels — in an upscale segment. Stag's Leap Wine Cellars in Napa has agreed to label one of its 1986 Chardonnays "Carneros District, Beckstoffer Vineyard."

But Andy points out that, unlike other vineyard designations, the Beckstoffer name does not refer to a specific delineated plot of ground, as does the Winery Lake name.

In his case, the name denotes only the name of the grower and a general area in which the grapes grow. In time, he said, the name may be seen on a Mendocino County Gewurztraminer and a Rutherford Cabernet as well as Chardonnay from the Carneros.