

# The WINE Page

## A man and the land — a Napa success story

By Jim Wood  
EXAMINER FOOD AND WINE CRITIC

**W**HEN Andy Beckstoffer was a kid he was told jokingly that it's rude to ask where someone is from: If he's from Virginia you'll know it, and if he's from anywhere else, well, you'll only embarrass the man.

Andy Beckstoffer, who this year is introducing a wine with the distinctly California name of Fremont Creek, is from Virginia by way of an MBA from Dartmouth. Like his hero John Fremont, he's a Southerner who has ventured to California and prospered. His Beckstoffer Vineyards acquired more than 1,200 prime grape acres, a condition he says makes him simultaneously rich in land and poor in cash.

"When people ask me if I know anything about cash, I say yeah, I love his songs."

Although Beckstoffer is partially kidding, it is true that for years he has indulged a habit of putting any extra money into grape land. During that time he learned to deal with the fundamental equation of California wine farming:

"In 1970 people would say, 'Oh you just can't afford to pay \$4,000 an acre.' Then in 1975 people would say, 'Oh you just can't afford to pay \$10,000 an acre but those folks who paid \$4,000 in 1970 just stole it.' Then in 1980 people would say, 'You just can't afford to pay \$15,000 an acre, but those folks who paid \$10,000 in 1975 just stole it.'" Since Beckstoffer was on the winning side of that equation all along, he can allow himself a wry grin.

A native of Richmond, Beckstoffer was graduated in four years from Virginia Tech, went to work briefly for the telephone company, joined the Army and as a young lieutenant ran the motor pool at the Presidio. He was the kind of Virginian whose wife went home without him so their daughter could be born in the Old Dominion. But then he went over to Berkeley one afternoon and heard President John F. Kennedy twang out a speech about excellence. Soon Andy had joined most of his friends who were deter-

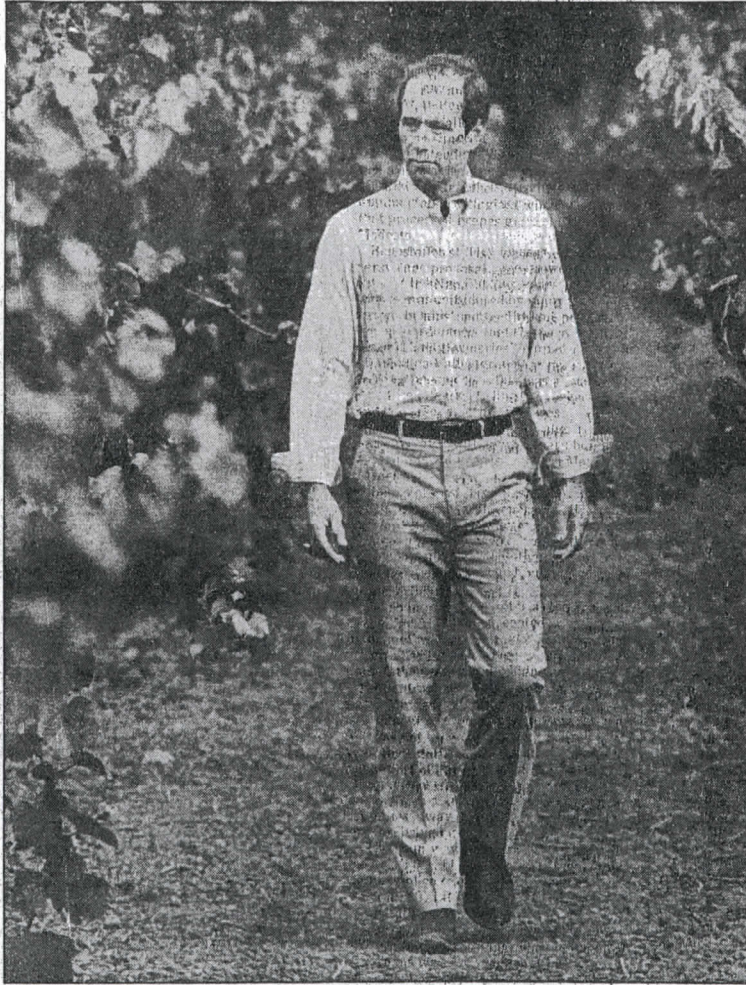
### Behind the wines

Amos Tuck, the crack Dartmouth business school, and in 1986 was recruited by Heublein, which was getting into the wine business. (It gives you some idea of the horizons painted by a place like Tuck that Andy refers to Heublein of that day as a small \$200 to \$300 million company.) He was assigned to corporate acquisitions along with the duties of executive vice president and the corporate counsel.

In 1968 the team negotiated the purchase of United Vintners, a California wine company that included, at that time, Inglenook and Italian Swiss. A year later, he negotiated the purchase of Beaulieu Vineyards and remained as vice president of planning for United Vintners. An important part of his job was responsibility for grape purchases for Beaulieu and Inglenook.

The year 1965 was the first in which premium dry wines sold more than sweet wines in California. As a result, good grapes for dry wines were at a premium. Beaulieu could not expand because it did not have enough grapes. To guarantee ample grapes for Beaulieu and Inglenook, Beckstoffer founded a Heublein subsidiary, Vinifera Development Corporation, to farm and manage vineyards. Vinifera followed an aggressive land purchasing program, often learning about available good land and wrapping it up before the real estate brokers knew it was for sale.

But in 1973, with the grape supply crisis eased, Heublein decided to sell Vinifera. The buyer was Beckstoffer. Asked where he got the money, he looks at you in this relaxed Southern way and says, why, from the company. Heublein provided 100 percent of the financing in installments. Beckstoffer came up with some security plus his considerable management skills. It was a good deal for both sides.



Andy Beckstoffer, of St. Helena, by way of Virginia

more than 3,000 acres of vineyards.

From Beckstoffer's own land he has supplied top California wineries such as Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Simi, Schug, Cakebread, Parducci, Raymond Vineyards, Silverado Vineyards, Beaulieu Vineyards, Fetzer Vineyards and Samuel J. Sebastiani Wines. In December 1986, Beckstoffer began work on a new phase. He had been selling 90 percent of his grapes to prestige wineries but 10 percent was going to negotiators, which he thought historically was not the best way for him to do business.

"I needed another way to sell my grapes," he said. "It seemed logical to have our own wine brand."

Beckstoffer hired Dimitri Tchelistcheff as an enological consultant, and together they agreed on the kind of wines Beckstoffer wanted to produce.

"I wanted something that my friends could enjoy every night," he says. "And at a price they can pay. I didn't want a big, oaky \$25 Chardonnay."

And like anyone with a new brand, Beckstoffer wanted to make sure his new label was right. A friend in "the permanent media" had worked for First Interstate Bank, Mrs. Fields and other consumer-oriented companies. Beckstoffer can get pretty elemental about the new wine's label with its watermark feel, the wine information normally on a label folded into the design element, its verticality, a symbolic creek and, to increase approachability, a square edge somewhat rounded off. He laughs about the "dot war" on where to locate a dot and notes that the label is just slightly narrower than normal so that the wine frames the label.

The new wine is named Fremont Creek. There's a Chardonnay, a Cabernet Sauvignon and a Sauvignon Blanc. They will be distributed by Sutter Home.

"I'm enjoying this," Beckstoffer said of the new wine. "The banks are excited because they think it's a great way to sell our grapes. I like the name, Fremont Creek, the wine. It's a great challenge."

Jim Wood's column on cooking is a regular feature of *Imago magis*.