

Beckstoffer buys famed Napa Valley vineyard

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ST. HELENA – Andrew Beckstoffer, Northern California's biggest independent wine grape grower, announced on Wednesday his purchase of one of Napa Valley's most famous vineyards, part of a Mexican land grant more than 150 years ago.

Beckstoffer, who owns Fremont Creek wines and owns and controls some 2,000 first-rate vineyard acreage in Napa and Mendocino counties, said he bought the 225-acre vineyard known as "Beaulieu Vineyard No. 3" from Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Co.

The vineyard is in one of the valley's recognized top sites for Bordeaux varieties, which include cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

The price was not given, but producing vineyards in the neighborhood – between the Silverado Trail and Highway 29 in the heart of the Napa Valley's acclaimed Rutherford district – are valued these days at an average \$50,000 an acre.

"This is one of the vineyards that has been supplying the backbone of BV cabernets for the past 50 years," Beckstoffer said today. "It's some of the land that built the reputation of Rutherford and the Napa Valley."

Beckstoffer said grapes harvested at the site – bounded on the west by Conn Creek Road, on the east by Silverado Trail, on the north by Caymus Vineyards and on the south by Skellenger Lane – will continue to go to Beaulieu, as well as to his own smaller winery, Fremont Creek.

"This does not cut off BV by any means," he added. "With the planting of new cabernet sauvignon clones and some new merlot and cabernet franc vines – all planted to tighter spacing – the vintner/grower expects tonnage to increase. "There'll be more for everybody," he added.

Founder of Beaulieu Vineyards, Georges de Latour, purchased the five parcels that make up the 225-acre vineyard in the early '30s from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco.

Then planted to cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir and aligote – a productive white wine grape of secondary quality – the resulting wines made by the legendary Andre Tchelistcheff proved beyond a doubt that this region was one of the world's best sites for Bordeaux varieties.

Beckstoffer's involvement with the vineyard began in 1969 when, as a Heublein vice president in charge of grape acquisitions, he negotiated its purchase. Beckstoffer then founded a Heublein subsidiary, Vinifera Development Corporation, to farm their vineyards.

Later, when Heublein began selling vineyard holdings, Beckstoffer negotiated a leveraged buyout, completed in 1978. Meanwhile, Beaulieu Vineyard No. 3 was sold to Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance and continued to be farmed by Beckstoffer's company.

Late last year, when Connecticut Mutual decided to liquidate its farm assets, he was first in line.

Noting the purchase is "a grower's dream," Beckstoffer revealed that BV did have right of first refusal to purchase the 225-acre site. "They decided not to buy it," he added.

A spokesman for the Heublein Fine Wine Group – of which Beaulieu is part – said today he had no information on that decision.

Combined with another parcel owned by Beckstoffer, the 250-acre site will be known as "Beckstoffer II."