

Beckstoffer at home with wine-country tensions

ST. HELENA — A COUPLE of years ago, a Napa Valley winery owner was about to be seated at a table at the restaurant at Meadow Country Club when she spied Andy Beckstoffer sitting at a nearby table.

She shuddered and asked to be moved across the room. "I can't sit near him," she said, irritated.

Andy Beckstoffer is a grape grower. And she is a winery owner. And never the twain, etc.

There always has been a dynamic tension between winery owners — those who buy grapes — and grape growers — those who sell them. But two years ago, Beckstoffer was considered by many winemakers to be the enemy.

He had proposed a county ordinance that 75 percent of all Napa Valley wineries' output be made from Napa Valley-grown grapes.

To some wineries, this was a high-handed move intended to line the pockets of the growers. To the growers it was a move intended to protect the Napa Valley from being inundated with giant winery buildings that processed grapes grown in Mojave or Modesto.

Beckstoffer still is amused by the controversy that proposal generated. He points out that the Napa Valley still is an agricultural



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Wine watch

community and to keep it that way, residents must protect themselves from entrepreneurs who could build huge winemaking facilities.

In fact, said Beckstoffer at the time, his proposal should be accepted by all wineries because they would benefit. They could protect the image of Napa Valley wine by ensuring that a high percentage of top-quality grapes wound up in wine bottled here.

Mentioned during the controversy was Sutter Home Winery, the world's largest producer of white Zinfandel. It was making some 3 million cases of wine, little of it coming from Napa Valley grapes, but the winery and a huge satellite plant a couple of miles away were

here, using water and power — and bringing in tourists.

The county eventually adopted the ordinance, but said that the 75 percent minimum applied only to future expansion; everyone existing at the time was grandfathered in.

The controversy, which pitted the Mercedes-driving winery owners against the jeans-wearing, pickup-driving growers, was not the first — or the last — that Beckstoffer has been involved in, a fact he sort of likes.

Beckstoffer still has the drawl of his native Richmond, Va., but no one should underestimate him as a mere country boy. He's one of the savviest businessmen around. The accent belies, for instance, the fact that he has a master's in business administration from Dartmouth College.

"Just because you're a grower doesn't mean you can't be a good businessman," Beckstoffer said. "We're not a high-button-shoes-and-bib-overalls business anymore. There are some bright people growing grapes."

In an interview the other day in his office atop a converted Victorian home off Main Street, Beckstoffer explained why he decided about two years ago to become not

just a grower but a winemaker, too.

"Developing the Fremont Creek brand made sense in terms of our total business," he said. "We are in the business of selling perishable fruit, and I needed another way to market that fruit.

"But also, as I spoke with wineries over the years, they told me of the trouble they had, troubles with marketing, and with regulation, and with taxation, and prohibitionists, and they encouraged me to see what it was like, from their point of view.

"They said, 'We want you to understand the problems.' So I did."

Beckstoffer said that his company's emphasis on the Fremont Creek brand of wines is minimal. Little more than 20,000 cases a year are made (under contract at Mendocino Vineyards), and his 1,500 acres of prime vineyard land probably could produce a half million cases of wine. "We don't make much money on Fremont Creek," he said.

The line is reasonably priced, including a Chardonnay and Cabernet under \$10 a bottle and a Sauvignon Blanc at \$6.50. He said that the wines were made to be consumed young and aimed largely at wine-by-the-glass programs in res-

taurants, emphasizing fruit.

It is unusual for a full-time grower as large as Beckstoffer to become a winemaker so late in the game. He owns 500 acres in the Napa Valley and another 1,000 acres in Mendocino County, and all told he manages more than 3,500 acres of California vineyard land, about 2,000 of it under contract to others.

Beckstoffer just shakes his head when he mulls over the infighting that has split the industry so often.

"We've just got to be better businessmen and look past the petty bickering," Beckstoffer said, pointing to numerous proposals now on the drawing board that would significantly raise taxes on all wine.

Incidentally, Beckstoffer isn't disliked by many hereabouts any more. Now he's seen as progressive and a defender of the soil. But there may be another political battle just around the bend.

"Wine watch" appears Wednesdays in Food. Write to Dan Berger, Los Angeles Times, Times Mirror Square, Los Angeles, CA 90053.