

Andy Beckstoffer: Just call him a farmer

A former **marathon** runner who still runs 10Ks, **W.** Andrew Beckstoffer has the right read on the business of growing grapes for wine. He knows that, like the wine business it feeds, building assets works and that looking for return on investment doesn't.

He also understands that farming, to hold off development interests, has to be run as a business. Unlike many old-time farmers, Andy Beckstoffer understands the purely business need for knowing and controlling costs. Why, then, has he so often been accused of 'paying too much' for so many parcels of ground?

"I'm convinced that survival, in this part of the country, is tied to the top, top tier of quality," he says with just a trace of native Virginia drawl. "Yes, people have said that we paid too much, but we've always bought the best property we could. And ten years after we 'paid too much,' we seem to have a 'bargain' on our hands!"

Beckstoffer is once again on a tear, buying up quality vineyard sites and applying the best science and technology to make them quality wine grape producers. After picking up **Krug's Cabral Ranch** (196 acres in **Carneros**) in '92, last year saw him add Louis Martini's historic **Las Amigas Ranch** (138 acres, also Carneros) and **Beaulieu Vineyard #4** (89 acres of Rutherford Bench, once part of Hamilton Walker **Crabb's** famed **To Kalon Vineyard**).

"When I left **Heublein** in 1973 to form my own vineyard company, my goal was to have a thousand acres in **Napa Valley** and a thousand acres in **Mendocino County**," says Beckstoffer, who went to Virginia **Tech** on a football scholarship. (He was a guard. Must have been a pulling guard.) He is now within 100 Mendocino acres of fulfilling that goal, which pleases him no end.

"I really enjoy this side of the business, and I take a lot of pride in being a farmer, being a grower of grapes for fine wine. But to do it well, you have to take advantage of the technology. The technology of business: knowing and controlling your costs. The technology of viticulture: being ahead of the curve on canopy management, **clonal** selection for complexity, knowing that **phylloxera** is yesterday's problem and that fan leaf virus is tomorrow's problem. The technology of marketing your product effectively, based on quality, based on having the right variety in the right location."

Beckstoffer is especially excited about the **Beaulieu #4** purchase (he acquired **Beaulieu #3** five years ago). "It was a great opportunity," he enthuses. "Where else could you find a vineyard with so much history to it? In the last century it was **To Kalon**, known both for its excellent wines and as an experimental station. In this century, it has been valued as one of the prime sources for the great **Beaulieu Vineyard Cabernets**. I don't know of any other vineyard, save perhaps the **Niebaum-Inglenook** piece in front of the winery, that has the same pre- and post-prohibition history."

Hamilton Walker **Crabb**, an Ohio native, came to the **Napa Valley** as the Civil War ended, purchasing a 240-acre tract on the northwest corner of Walnut Drive and Highway 29 in Rutherford in January 1868. Four years later he had a winery in full operation and eventually had over 350 acres planted to vines.

Crabb wore his hair short and sported a grizzled beard, and as a vintner was known for his Burgundy, made from "Crabb's Black Burgundy" grapes. Also known as **Refosco**, which hails from northern Italy. He called his vineyard **To Kalon**, which he said was the Greek for "the highest beauty" or "the highest good." But he himself was quoted as saying, "I try to make it

mean the boss vineyard."

But Crabb's primary notoriety comes from having been the first true horticulturist involved in Napa Valley wine. He is reported to have had more the 400 different varieties of grape under cultivation, and was always generous in sharing information as well as grape cultivars. He was also at the forefront of the research for developing rootstock resistant to phylloxera upon its first appearance in the New World.

As such, it was entirely appropriate that To Kalon's second owner, banker E. W. Churchill, deeded 15 acres for a Department of Agriculture research station in 1911 (today the U.C. Davis Experimental Station on Oakville Grade). Indeed, one of the reasons Beckstoffer is so pleased to have the site is for Beaulieu's own clonal research plot for Cabernet, which was started in 1980.

Beckstoffer notes that Crabb owned To Kalon for 30 years, Churchill had it for a bit more than 40 years, and Beaulieu's stewardship of their part extended to exactly 50 years (Mondavi's Block Pisa sliver of the original To Kalon). So you might figure Beckstoffer to hold the parcel for 60 years! "Yeah, it'll go into a trust for my kids," he grins.

Though there are early indications of phylloxera at Beaulieu #4, Beckstoffer doesn't anticipate the need to replant the majority for another five to ten years. (There is an open 12 acre parcel that will be planted this year.) "Our main immediate focus is on our Carneros holdings, which are older plantings that do need to be replanted."

Beckstoffer, who says he anticipates expenditures of \$20 million in vineyard development over the next decade—How's that for optimistic!/? — is looking at replanting 300 acres at the Las Amigas and Cabral ranches. The largest part of those plantings (150 acres) will be to Merlot, with 100 acres of Chardonnay and 50 of Pinot noir.

"If you're planting vines in Napa County, they ought to be red grapes," asserts Beckstoffer. "Pinot noir can make a wonderful wine, but people still aren't quite ready to pay for them. And, though some have criticized Carneros Merlot as being too harsh, I think Carneros can be perfect for the variety. It's just cool enough that you extend the growing season long enough to achieve great flavor maturity."

Beckstoffer is adamant that he will not fumigate his Carneros replants. "Nematodes are not a problem there, so there's no good reason to be so heavy-handed on the earth. Yes, fumigation will kill some of the bad things, but it also kills too many of the good things that live in a healthy vineyard. Plus, it costs a lot to fumigate. We've deep ripped the land, and we put some cover crop in there to add some nutrients. We'll plant dormant rootstock in 1995. We are convinced that planting a sound, healthy plant is far preferable to sterilizing the ground."

He plans to work with five different rootstocks, none of which will be 5C. "We'll focus on 101-14 as our primary rootstock, mainly because it pushes the earliest in the spring. We want the longest growing season for even flavor development. After that will be 3309, which viticultural consultant Lucie Morton says is the next earliest budding rootstock.

"We're also looking to Lucie for a new, European process of cleaning up the scions. Heat-treating is just too heavy-handed a process. You seem to get vines that don't produce fruit with any clear character. We're also looking to plant a variety of clones, both in Cabernet and Chardonnay. I think that a good part of the complexity of those wines, by the year 2000, will come from blending that will happen in the vineyard through clonal diversity."

Beckstoffer suggests that, as an independent grower—the largest in the North Coast—he might be held to a higher standard than a winery-owned viticulturist. "We have to have something different, something better to recommend our grapes. We have to have the best terroir, the best clones, the best trellising system. And that's a wonderful challenge to meet."

He obviously hasn't been doing too badly at it. His more than two dozen clients include Beaulieu, Beringer, Simi, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Acacia, Rasmussen, Signorello, Newton, Fetzer and Kendall-Jackson. (A small amount of fruit is earmarked for Beckstoffer's own label, Fremont Creek.) "Simi gets all of its Chenin blanc from our Mendocino holdings, and Fetzer's Barrel Select Chardonnay uses our fruit. As Mendocino fruit gets more recognition, it'll be in the

running with **Sonoma!**"

Though his original degree was in engineering ("I wanted to build houses"), after an Army stint in San Francisco he returned East to take a Master's at Dartmouth's Amos Tuck School of Business Administration. Recruited by **Heublein**, he became part of the team that investigated, then negotiated **Heublein's** purchase of United Vintners (including **Inglenook**) and Beaulieu. He then slid into vineyard development, before opening his own company in 1973.

Having been in the business for more than a quarter century now, Beckstoffer doesn't have much patience for the **naysayers** that always crop up when things get a touch tough. "Let's remember 20 years ago, and 10 years ago, when the bottom fell out of the wine business and everybody was ready to quit," he fires off. "In 1974 Cabernet prices dropped from \$800 a ton to less than \$400, and people were ready to write off vineyards and build tract houses. But how many of the great Napa Valley wineries were opened in the '70s?"

"Then again, in 1983, Cabernet and Chardonnay prices dropped 10% and the Cabernet crop was down 20%. And the **Eutypa** fungus was on its way here. Pull the vineyards, plant houses, everybody said. But don't those days look pretty good right now?"

Beckstoffer's message is quite clear: This, too, shall pass. Do your homework, be businesslike, and do a better job than the next guy and you'll survive to tell tall tales. "The vineyard business is no longer high buckle boots and bib overalls," counsel's Beckstoffer, whose elegant office sits in a warm aerie on the third floor of a sturdy 1883 home that once stood on St. Helena's Main Street, but was moved to Pope Street in 1954 amid pomp and circumstance. ("Oh yeah. They closed the schools, took down the telephone lines and set up lemonade stands along Main Street," he laughs. "It must have taken them all day to do it.")

Beckstoffer is convinced that it's a whole new world for grape growers, especially those who pride themselves on producing distinctive grapes worthy of the "Reserve" designation. "Grape growers are no longer second-class citizens, and neither are farm workers third-class citizens. The quality that is demanded today is something that we never envisioned before, yet we are doing it by having a better understanding of what the wineries need to do their job at the highest level. If we deliver clean loads, on time, and communicate well with the winery personnel, we'll have a vocation that we can be proud of and that will, with good business management, provide a good living for a long time."

(Hinkle wrote the viticulture column for seven years for California-Arizona FARM PRESS and scripted the video "WINES OF A PLACE," narrated by the late Raymond Burr. He also shared the Wine Literary Award with Dan Berger for their two BEYOND THE GRAPES books.)