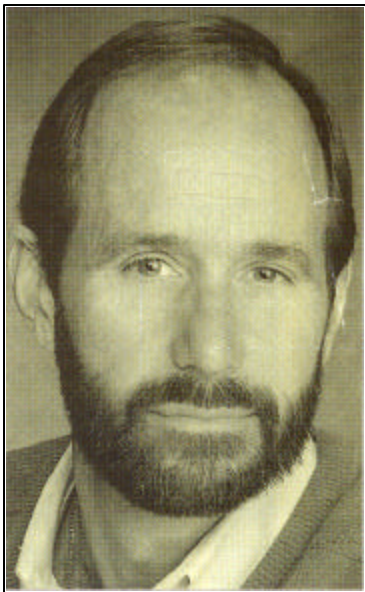


BOUNDARY ZONES

Estate bottled wine has, until recently, been regarded as a promise of quality. But the definition of the relationship between winery and vineyard is increasingly a matter of controversy. By Larry Walker

Wine bottled by vineyard owners in their own cellars has always been regarded as a guarantee of authenticity and often of wine quality, whether it is called *mis en bouteille an domaine*, as in France, *Erzeugerabfüllung* in Germany, or estate-bottled in the US.

This cachet of quality or assumed quality has lost a good bit of its value in California - the victim, according to some, of abuse of US regulations concerning the estate bottled name, while others believe the wine consumer isn't really interested. In the US, the term estate bottled is defined as wine made from grapes grown in the winery vineyards or vineyards leased and controlled by the winery on a long-term basis. There was no requirement that the vineyards be contiguous to the winery, only that the winery and the vineyards be in the same appellation.



The problem is in the interpretation of the phrase 'leased and controlled'. There are many cases where contracts are written between growers and winery owner with a clause asserting that the winery has 'viticultural control' of the vineyard, even when no lease, either short- or long-term, is involved. These clauses are called 'paper control', or 'the Beaulieu clause'. The Beaulieu vineyard was, early on, a strong proponent of estate-bottled wines, but in later years, critics said that Beaulieu's actual control of the vineyards was minimal.

Marc Mondavi, of the Charles Krug winery, has been one of Beaulieu's critics in the past. 'I have serious questions about the definition of viticultural control when the actual winery isn't farming the vineyard,' he says. 'I think in the past, Beaulieu has had contracts like that. I think the winery should at least lease the vineyard, if not own it, and have real viticultural control. We have vineyards in the Carneros region which we could call estate bottled if we wanted to use the Napa appellation, and under US regulations, we can't call them estate bottled since our winery is outside the Carneros appellation.' At present Krug does not produce a wine which is labelled estate bottled, although according to Mondavi, most of the company's wines could carry such a label.

Andy Beckstoffer owns Beckstoffer Vineyards, a farming operation that owns over 2,000 acres of vineyards in Napa and Mendocino county. Beckstoffer was with Heublein at the Beaulieu winery when the estate bottled concept was first developed in California.

'In the early days, we thought estate bottled was very important because what it meant was that the winery had complete control over the whole project. I think over the years the controls have been relaxed,' he said. It can definitely be a paper control.'

Beckstoffer now sells grapes to Beaulieu, and says that the winery does have some viticultural controls. 'They can come in and tell us how they want the grapes farmed. Ideally, what happens is that you work with people for years and years and develop a good working relationship in terms of doing the

same things with grapes year after year.'

Richard Walton, a wine industry veteran who was named president of Beaulieu in January of this year, says the importance of the concept of estate bottled has lessened. 'It is no longer the focus here, no longer the key factor it was in the past,' he says. 'The emphasis is going in a different direction - that is, towards the appellation of origin.'

Walton says that it wasn't industry abuse of the term or customer confusion that was behind the thinking at Beaulieu, but a desire to use terms with which the consumer could emphasize, such as origin of appellation.

'For example,' he explains, 'I think the Carneros people have done a tremendous promotional job of giving meaning to the Carneros appellation. That is something the consumer can relate to.' Walton cautions that estate bottled was not a dead concept, although there are no plans at present for Beaulieu to produce an estate bottled wine.

Beringer Vineyards is another Napa winery that could use the term estate bottled, but doesn't. Tor Kenward, a winery spokesperson, says that Beringer has come more to rely on vineyard designation: 'I suppose in a lot of cases, we could add "estate bottled", but there is only so much room on the label. To us, the vineyard designation means a lot. For some, estate bottled might be a useful marketing tool, however.'

Robert Steinhauer, the vineyard manager at Beringer, says even though Beringer didn't use the term anymore, he would not want to give up the possibility of using it in the future. 'Most of our vineyards we either own outright, or we have 30-year leases, which give us complete viticultural control,' he explains. 'We actually farm the land. That would be a case where estate bottled could rightfully be used.'

'I think the general feeling is that the term doesn't have a great deal of meaning anymore,' he continues. 'I think it needs a better definition, it needs to be tightened up. I would personally like to narrow the definition. The vineyards should be under total control of the winery, not just a clause in the purchase contract. Also, I don't believe that purchased fruit should ever qualify for estate bottled, no matter what the contract says.'

Beckstoffer agrees with Kenward's point regarding vineyard designation.

'I think that vineyard designation is what estate bottling used to be,' he says. 'With vineyard designation, the consumer now has the guarantee that year after year, grapes are coming from the same vineyard to go into the bottle.'

Beckstoffer's point was that the consumer would become familiar with the vineyard name and, over the years, come to depend on it.

'You get that consistency over the years,' he explains. 'If you don't like, say, Martha's Vineyard wines now, you're probably never going to like them.'

'I think if we do the vineyard designation thing right, it will begin to mean something to the consumer,' Beckstoffer continues. 'And it should be a long-term relationship in order to get vineyard designation on the bottle.'

Several of the wineries on California's north coast use Beckstoffer Vineyards on their labels because of the company's reputation for good viticultural practices. 'That has always been our thing: the close association between our growing the grapes and somebody making the wine,' stresses Beckstoffer. 'That's what's important.'

Another sub-argument for the importance of the vineyard designation is the very sketchy requirements for establishing the US viticultural areas (VAs). The basic regulations sound good. The Bureau of

Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) requires that those who want to establish a VA show some evidence of similar growing conditions and that the use of the name to describe the region has some historical basis, even though that basis need have nothing to do with wine grapes. In order to use a VA description, only two real requirements must be met:

- Eighty-five percent of the wine must originate within the named area.
- If the wine is a varietal wine, then 75% of the named varietal must come from the area.

That may well sound like double talk until you remember that a named varietal need only be 75% of the wine in the bottle; in other words all the named varietal must come from within a VA. Obviously, anything else from anywhere else can be used.

There are no qualifying requirements regarding grape variety, level of production, method of growth, irrigation, or how the wine is made.

Whatever the original intent of the VA system, the BATF has tended to be inclusive rather than exclusive. American wineries use the system as a marketing tool. Obviously, to be able to say your wine originated in 'Napa Valley' is a boost to your sales pitch.

Therefore, there is great pressure to stretch the boundaries to meaningless points. The Napa Valley VAs, for example, include the whole of Napa County, which takes in Pope Valley and Chiles Valley, two areas with river drainage systems and soils completely outside the Napa Valley itself.

In a real sense, the argument that the vineyard designation is the next step up from estate bottled and a meaningful alternative to VA does make sense. Both terms are geographical descriptions, but vineyard designated, according to Beckstoffer and others, implies that special care is taken. It is closer to being a guarantee of quality.

It would also solve another problem for California winemakers. Many vineyards in California are simply planted in the wrong place; whether or not they are estate vineyards is simply beside the point. If your winery is in a warm growing region and your estate vineyards are planted to Pinot Noir, then estate bottled doesn't really mean much. Ah, but if you could bag a long-term lease on a cool-climate vineyard, and make your Pinot Noir from those grapes, then you might have something worth putting on the label.

Always, of course, provided that your winemaker didn't screw up.