

Andy Beckstoffer

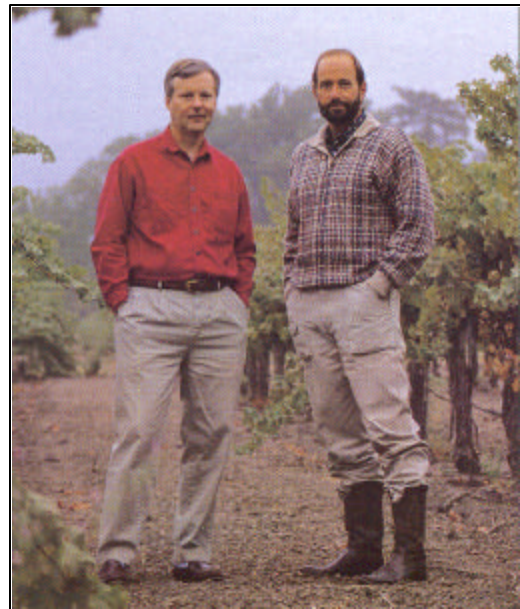
A GROWING FORCE BEHIND NAPA CABERNET ★ BY ROD SMITH

There is more to a bottle of California wine than meets the eye. The winery or brand named on the label doesn't necessarily say anything about who grew the grapes. As the influential independent grower Andy Beckstoffer says (and he says this often), "Eighty percent *at the* wine grapes in California are grown by people who don't make wine, so the quality of California wine depends to a great extent on independent growers. And if we don't grow good grapes, we're out of business. We can't sell our mistakes off in bulk, like a winery can. And these grapes have seeds, so nobody's going to ear 'em."

Beckstoffer Vineyards and its wholly-owned subsidiary Winegrowers Farming Company, are headquartered in what looks like a century-old Victorian house (it was actually built from scratch a few years ago) at the company's home vineyard, contiguous with Caymus Vineyards in the heart of the Rutherford appellation. The company owns approximately 2,000 acres, about half in Mendocino County and half in Napa Valley.

At first glance, Beckstoffer Vineyards may not seem extraordinary. There are other large growers on the north coast (Sonoma's Sangiacomo Vineyards and Vino Farms, for example), and some with more recognizable names (Sangiacomo Vineyards, in Carneros-Sonoma, is designated on the labels of a dozen wineries each year). The company's Mendocino County vineyards supply major labels such as Fetzer, Simi, Beringer, and Kendall-Jackson, but the wines are generally multi-source blends that benefit from Beckstoffer fruit without necessarily showing its character.

Several things set Beckstoffer Vineyards apart. One is the company's disproportionate influence in the high-profile Napa Valley, where it is the largest independent grower (only Heublein and Mondavi, both wine producers as well as growers, own more vineyard acreage). Another is the impact its founder and president, Andy Beckstoffer, has had on the independent grape growing community. Beckstoffer is largely responsible for inventing and developing the role of the contract grower at the highest level of wine quality. Unlike many California grape farmers at the time, Beckstoffer knew the meaning of fine wine before he began growing grapes in 1969, and got a good sense of the specialized needs of premium winemaking from his first viticulturist, André Tchelistcheff. Beckstoffer also seems to possess an ability to "see" the future, assimilating and implementing new ideas with a vigor that alternately challenges and



baffles his competitors. And there is most definitely an element of savvy marketing, a very specialized form that invites the complicity of clients in creating the product.

Finally, there is the sheer dazzling quality of Beckstoffer's Napa Valley holdings, 1,005 acres divided nearly equally between Rutherford, Oakville, and Carneros. Each of the ten vineyards is superb; most have been known historically as coveted fruit sources, and several are recognized within the valley's wine community as living treasures. Together they constitute the most impressive portfolio of viticultural properties in California.

Unlike vineyard-designated Sangiacomo Vineyards wines, which tend to show similar fruit characteristics because they all come from one general area in Carneros-Sonoma, wines from the geographically diverse Beckstoffer locations are virtually impossible to characterize by aromas and flavor. Rather, the quality of Beckstoffer fruit (and its impact on the general character of Napa Valley wine) can be gauged by looking at a partial list of producers who use it (see box on tile next page).

Andy Beckstoffer has been assembling collection of viticultural treasures for more than a quarter-century. During that time he has been an outspoken advocate for the independent grower, and was instrumental in establishing the economic model for a successful top-quality grape growing business. On one hand he has been a conservative grower, particularly in the Napa Valley, where he focuses on five grape varieties that can pull the \$20 per bottle retail price that he considers necessary for profitable grape growing. On the other hand his operation is in a continual state of evolution, consistently on the cutting edge in viticultural technology and practice—from the design and construction of an experimental spray rig in the company's shop by master mechanic Jack Christensen, to the abandonment of formula farming (one-size-fits-all vine spacing, for example) in favor of site-specific farming, and the early embrace of new clones, rootstocks, and trellises. "You're not selling cabernet sauvignon or ever Rutherford fruit anymore," Beckstoffer asserts. "You're selling clone, and rootstock, and trellis."

He recalled a conversation with André Tchelistcheff in which the legendary vigneron told him, "Go for clones, not for varieties." The wisdom in that advice has become increasingly clear, said Beckstoffer. He has continued to diversify within his vineyards. For example, in the Las Amigas vineyard he has planted three grape varieties, ten clones, and seven rootstocks, combined with different soils in thirty-one different blocks, with several different trellising systems. "For an operation our size we need to diversify, and we decided to diversify in multiple clones and rootstocks instead of multiple varieties."

Andy Beckstoffer is a slim, athletic Virginian in his mid-fifties who jets around the valley in a bright red Mercedes-Benz jeep, communicating with his people by cell-phone—in other words, the classic image of an escapee from the corporate world, which he is.

He arrived in the Napa Valley as a Heublein executive in 1968 as part of a three-man acquisition team sent from company headquarters to expand Heublein's United Vintners portfolio. "We quickly realized that we didn't have enough grapes for Inglenook or BV, so I was asked to form a company to get grapes," he recalled. "That's when we developed the economics of prime varietal vineyards, and then I was forced to set up a farming company." Vinifera Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Heublein, was formed in '70. By '72, Beckstoffer said, they were farming some 3,000 acres (nearly ten percent of the Napa Valley) and had a long-term grape supply for Inglenook and BV firmly in place.

An important episode during that period was Heublein's battle over unionization with the United Farm Workers, led by Caesar Chavez. Beckstoffer was the chief negotiator; the deal he eventually struck with the union was signed in a San Jose motel room and celebrated with a nice, warm bottle of 1969 Inglenook Pinot Chardonnay. Beckstoffer still has that bottle on display in his wine cellar; it bears the signatures of Chavez, UPW lieutenant Dolores Huerta, Beckstoffer, several lawyers, and the scrawled date: August 17, 1971.

"So we accomplished all that," recalled Beckstoffer, "and Heublein said okay, let's sell the company. But I couldn't find a buyer for this not-for-profit company with a union contract. And Heublein couldn't find me a job with them that I wanted to take, so I said sell me the company." Heublein and Connecticut Mutual Life loaned him the money to buy Vinifera Development Corporation and he went into business for himself in 1973. Unfortunately, the next few years saw double-digit inflation. By 1978 he was broke, and Heublein demanded its \$5 million back. "I kept the Mendocino acreage and my house, but I have to tell you that was a tough time," he said. It ended happily, however: Connecticut Mutual stuck with him until he was back on his feet with Beckstoffer Vineyards in its present form.

Beckstoffer chuckled wryly as he described his first meeting with André Tchelistcheff. The Heublein acquisition team had very quietly purchased BV from the Sullivan family before any of the employees knew what was happening, he said. "Then the chairman and the lawyer flew home early, and I was left to explain to André that Heublein had bought the company. I went through this long spiel and then he said to me, and these were his exact words, 'Talk is cheap—we'll see what you do.' And we developed a relationship from there. André was my first viticulturist, and we also brought in a young viticulturist from Fresno named Bob Steinhauer. It was magnificent how the old respected the young and the young respected the old."

When the economy soured again in the early '90s, Beckstoffer was in a different position. In quick succession he was able to snap up viticultural treasures from Charles Krug, Louis Martini, and BV. "It's in those days that you're able to buy good ground. That kind of property just doesn't come up except in hard times."

One of the most interesting aspects of Beckstoffer Vineyards is how it has evolved in parallel to the Napa Valley wine community, which resembles a very intelligent and adaptable organism that learns as it goes, instantly assimilating new knowledge to become ever more effective. Warren Winiarski observes, "Their first vineyards were not specifically innovative, but the vineyards they're planting now are innovative, and responsive to the state of knowledge. It's a very fast track of learning."

Nature stimulates learning with constant tests and surprises. The latest came with the 1996 harvest, which was unexpectedly a difficult one for California's grape growers—an on-again, off-again, hurry-up-and-wait ordeal that strained grower-winery relations because ultimately the healthy crop that had been projected failed to completely materialize in fermentation tanks. Grape tonnage was off the projections as much as sixty percent in some places, and the worst part was that it foiled the most experienced eyes and the best computerized crop models.

On September 11, 1996 it rained in St. Helena. John Crossland, vice-president of Winegrowers Farming Company and Beckstoffer's right hand man, awoke to a sound he

hadn't heard for months: the patter of raindrops on his roof. It didn't last long, just long enough to remind Crossland that in his business, nothing can be taken for granted.

Grapes, for example. As his picking crews entered Beckstoffer IV that morning to commence harvesting, it quickly became obvious to Crossland that the weight of ripe grapes coming off the vines and the tonnage his client wineries were expecting would not exactly match.

When a vineyard is being picked, a forklift sits in the open space where trucks pull in to pick up loads of freshly-picked fruit to be driven to wineries. Hanging from the raised fork is a portable hi-tech scale, a small box with an LCD readout, a few buttons below the face, and a government inspector's wax-and-wire seal on the calibration control. Coming out of the bottom of the box is a cable with a large hook attached.

Every few minutes a tractor crawls out of the vine rows pulling a bin full of grapes. Before each bin is stacked on the truck it is weighed, an operation closely attended by all parties. As the scale takes the full weight of the bin all eyes are on the LCD readout. When the numbers stop flashing the foreman records the weight, a label is slapped on the bin, and it goes onto the truck. Like the company, the pickers are paid by the weight. They can earn as much as \$12-14 an hour if the weight is there. But a bin full of grapes is not a bin full of grapes where weight is concerned—depending on the density of clusters, the size of berries, how much juice they contain, one mass of grapes may weigh more than another.

As the first few bins were weighed that morning in Beckstoffer IV the head pickers returned to their *compadres* shaking their heads, and the word went down the rows where men were sweating and cutting bundles from the vines: the weight isn't there. The foreman looked at his clipboard and frowned as he keyed the talk button on his walkie-talkie. In his truck on Highway 29, John Crossland turned up his radio and got the word. With a set jaw, Crossland pulled his cellphone out of its cradle and speed-dialed. "Morning, Andy," he said. "I hate to ruin your day, but it's not looking too good over here."

"We were embarrassed," Beckstoffer admitted later. "We knew it was light. We didn't think it was this light. The reason we didn't know sooner is that it has to do with bunch weight, not bunch count, so it's hard to gauge while the fruit is still on the vine. Our normal sampling didn't pick it up. What happened was the rain in May and heat in early August created inconsistencies, so if you didn't sample in all the right spots you didn't get it. That really embarrassed us—I think everybody was embarrassed, but I market the fruit, so I get the call [from irate winemakers]." Technological competence has always been one of Beckstoffer's top priorities. For him the 1996 debacle was not so much a wake-up call as a reminder that there is always more a grower can do to perfect the product. One of the most important things a contract grower has to offer the winemaker is experience with particular plots of ground. John Crossland said, "It's surprising how often the winemaker will be ready to pick and we'll say, with the history of this block another ten days of hang time might benefit you. Or they'll say the fruit isn't ready, and we'll say yes it is. And it is." Grower-winemaker relations haven't always been so easy, Crossland said. "I've been managing vineyards since nineteen-seventy-two, and it's only in the last five years that we've been communicating better with wineries. There was an elitist attitude before. The winemakers didn't want some farmer being presumptuous about knowing how to make a good wine."

Winemaker Bob Levy buys fruit from thirty-two vineyards between Carneros and Calistoga for the range of Merryvale Vineyards wines. Since '93 he has bought Beckstoffer merlot for a vineyard-designated bottling, Beckstoffer IV, totalling a few hundred cases—a miniscule amount in the grand scheme of things, but well in the ballpark for a single-vineyard wine that will retail for \$30 per bottle (the '94 will be released this spring). Levy offered an example of why he likes working with the Beckstoffer organization. "I like things to visually be manicured, shoots tucked neatly, hedged and trimmed neatly," he said. "The whole idea is to get good light exposure and get sunlight without sunburn, for improved fruit flavor and tannin maturity. People up and down the valley are putting in these vertical trellises, but they don't know what to do with them—they don't tuck shoots and lift the wires, they just let everything flop all over like the old 'California tee'. I see this over and over again, but not with the Beckstoffer group."

Warren Winiarski has produced a Beckstoffer Chardonnay since 1986. The fruit comes from a natural "fruit bowl" in the low hills of the northern Carneros, along Carneros Creek not far from the famous Winery Lake Vineyard. The Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Beckstoffer Chardonnay has been very well received, but Winiarski is a notorious perfectionist. He feels that better fruit would make a better wine, and within the next few years hopes to have that improved fruit.

Because of phylloxera's threat to the AXR-1 roots at Carneros Creek, the vineyard will have to be replanted. Beckstoffer has determined that since this is a relatively warm, sheltered spot, it should be replanted to merlot. Meanwhile, Winiarski has agreed to shift his chardonnay source south to the Las Amigas vineyard, which is already being replanted to his specifications. "It's still a grower-winery relationship," Winiarski observed, "but he made a very specific effort to find out what we'd like as far as clones and rootstock, and even spacing issues came up." To accommodate the Stag's Leap style, Beckstoffer agreed to plant several different clones of chardonnay, including newly available ones from Dijon, and to space the vines a mere five feet apart in the rows.

Winiarski has a high and very specific expectation of what the new vineyard can offer in terms of wine quality. "The word is transparency—we want more clarity or transparency at the end, a clear, unblurred taste access to the very end of the fruit on the palate. That's what we're looking to achieve—brighter, clearer fruit, without any blur or obscuration of the clear focus of the flavors." Does he expect a notable difference in the sensory profile of the wine? "I expect the intensity issue to be more focused, but I don't expect flavors to change," he said. Nor does he expect to change the winemaking "We've got the winemaking parameters in place. Our settling, our lack of crushing and maceration, are prepared to give us the higher quality with the improved fruit."

He added, "We would be very surprised and disappointed if all our meddling failed to achieve the results we want."

Beckstoffer Vineyards officially talks about yield in pounds per lineal foot, rather than tons per acre. Both terms translate to the same volume of juice, but there is a spin to the Beckstoffer terminology. It is a way of convincing winemakers that he can grow more fruit with as good or better quality. This new perspective follows a change in cultural practice from the wide spacing of vines traditional in California (8'x12') toward the closer spacing found in European vineyards, which can add thousands of vines more per acre. The basic idea is that more plants means more lineal feet of fruit bearing vine, hence

more tonnage per acre—even while reducing the crop load on each individual vine. In simplest terms, a given vine produces less fruit but the whole vineyard produces more, and because the limited yield from each vine is better the overall vineyard quality is better—a classic win-win situation. This marks a long overdue shift in thinking in California, away from the vague impression that lower overall tonnage per acre means higher quality. As wines made from Beckstoffer fruit and fruit produced by the increasing number of like-minded growers continue to please winemakers and consumers, this more accurate view of yield per vine is rapidly becoming accepted.

Andy Beckstoffer believes his company's profile will be raised considerably going into the next millennium. Kendall-Jackson's announcement that it will produce single-vineyard wines from two of the historic BV vineyards now owned by Beckstoffer, and that it will build a new winery specifically for that purpose, is seen by observers of California winedom as a signpost to the future. "Jess Jackson and I share the vision that after the turn of the century the best wines will be single-vineyard expression," notes Beckstoffer. The wines will have historic significance as the first modern single-vineyard wines made from those superb properties (BV wines have always been blends).

The project also means a double reunion for Kendall-Jackson vice-president Tom Selfridge—not just with his old friend Andy Beckstoffer, whom he first met while working at BV as winemaker and, eventually, president from 1972-1989, but also with vineyards that mean something to him on a personal level.

"It's especially nice for me because I used to work with those grapes," said Selfridge. "That's a great piece of ground, and we really want to make a wine that expresses that terroir."

It's likely that other important expressions of Napa Valley terroir will come from Beckstoffer-farmed vineyards. Andy Beckstoffer insists that good business is synonymous with the pursuit of highest quality, that quality is the most commercial motivation for a grower in his position, and the best insurance against inevitable economic downturns. "You can go back to the 1860s and you'll find that the Crabbs and Krugs, when faced with problems went with quality," he said. "Then the new families like Martini and Mondavi, it was the same thing, the solution has always been quality. In good times everybody makes money, but in bad times if you have bad grapes you hurt a lot. That's history—it was always quality that got the guys through who made it through."

Rod Smith is a San Francisco-based Writer at Large for Wine & Spirits