

# A Bit of Land in a Bottle

Change sometimes occurs in the California wine industry in subtle ways. One of the most talked-about shifts is from the emphasis on a specific grape to define a wine to a wine that reflects a certain piece of land. These single-vineyard wines, as they are called, usually are seen in super-premium and ultra-premium wines, especially red, in the \$50-and-up price range.

One of the proponents of this single-vineyard concept is Andy Beckstoffer, a Napa Valley grape grower who has, since 1973, acquired choice vineyards in the Napa Valley, Napa-Carneros, Mendocino and Lake counties. Among Beckstoffer's holdings is the 221-acre Georges III Vineyard, formerly Beaulieu Vineyard No. 3, the source of some of Beaulieu's best Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon. He sells his grapes only to wineries that agree to bottle the wine as a single vineyard, or what Beckstoffer calls a "single-site expression," such as Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Beckstoffer Vineyard Chardonnay.

Beckstoffer traces the origins of single-site expression to years ago when the emphasis was on estate bottlings that often were blends. Then, in 1983, the Napa Valley got its own AVA (American Appellation Area), and other sub-appellations, like Rutherford, soon followed.

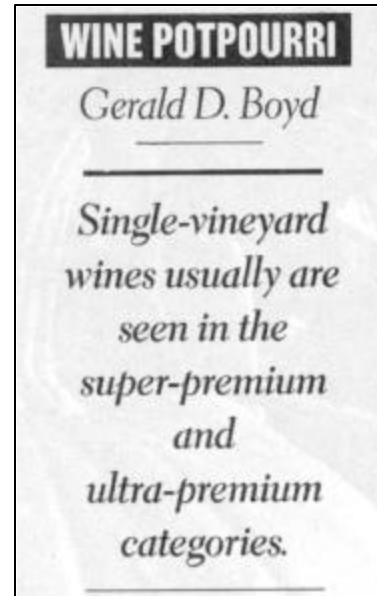
"These moves were involved more with politics than grape growing then, but now the emphasis is more on the land defining the appellation." Beckstoffer says that a piece of land is not political and if the consumer can understand the concept of terroir, he can understand the idea of single-site expressions and how they relate to appellation. Terroir is a French term that means the total grape-growing environment, soil, climate and more.

Last month, Beckstoffer invited a few people to an educational tasting at Fort Mason to illustrate his point that the defining element of certain high-end wines is land, not grape. The tasting began with seven vintages of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Beckstoffer Vineyard Chardonnay. The 1996, 1993 and 1992 were my favorites. They were an elegant group of chardonnays with nicely focused fruit flavors and a flinty-mineral quality that emerged more in the older vintages. Next came four vintages of Acacia Beckstoffer Vineyard Pinot Noir, with the characteristic Carneros black cherry and spice flavors. The 1997 and 1995 vintages stood out for me.

Capping the extensive tasting were nine vintages of Guenoc Beckstoffer Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, two vintages of Merryvale Beckstoffer Cabernet Sauvignon and one Clos du Val Georges III Cabernet Sauvignon.

Guenoc's 1996, 1995, 1995-1989 Cabernets showed concentrated, luscious fruit, fine tannins and great length. Clos du Val 1997 Georges III Cabernet Sauvignon was elegant, minty with yummy chocolate-cherry flavors, while the Merryvale 1997 Beckstoffer Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon was more concentrated with bigger tannins.

The influence of site and soil is sometimes difficult to separate from winemaking and vintage variations. For me, the influence of land was more evident in the red wines than the whites. But



the key for the wine consumer is to look for a flavor thread that evokes a style you like.

### **French Paradox Revisited**

A few years ago, French scientists told the world that, based on their studies, moderate wine consumption reduces the risk of coronary heart disease. The report became known as the French Paradox because the French consume more fat, yet have less heart disease.

Now, new studies from the University of Bordeaux, as reported in the Archives of Internal Medicine, reinforce the earlier studies about the benefits of moderate wine consumption, adding that the new study also shows a significant risk reduction for overall mortality.