

WINE & BUSINESS

Beckstoffer touts vineyard-specific wines as the 'next level' for Napa

Featuring vineyard 'terroir' is the next level in winemaking

by Barry W. Dugan

Winemakers and wine writers like to dazzle their respective audiences with flowery language and foreign phrases, most often used in describing the myriad and marvelous, or in some cases miserable, characteristics of a particular wine.

Grape growers tend to be earthier types — with their hands in the soil and their eye on the taste and ripeness of the grapes. Andy Beckstoffer, however, can trade superlatives with the best of them. And his latest favorite is *terroir*, an elusive concept that he is touting as the next frontier for winemaking and grape growing.

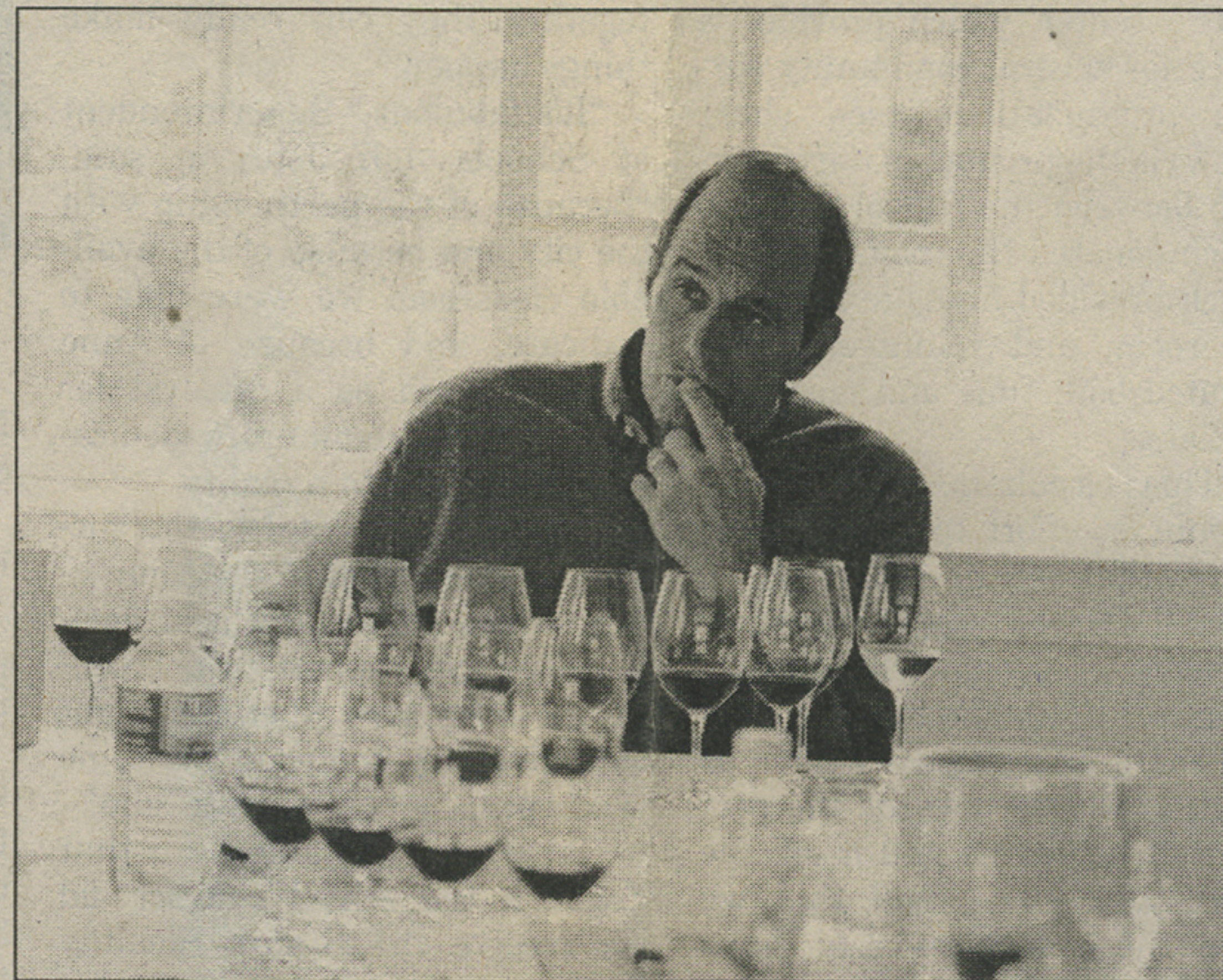
"Terroir is the combination of all the physical qualities of a vineyard — soil, climate — as adapted by the grower, where

the total is greater than the parts," said Beckstoffer, who is the largest family-owned vineyard owner in Napa Valley. "It is in this mysterious terroir, where things are bigger than they seem."

But before a skeptic can ask, he asks the question himself: "But who cares? You think the guy in San Francisco is thinking about dirt when he orders a bottle of wine? I don't think so. He's thinking about quality ... and how he can get it over and over again ... and he's looking for us to give him that."

Beckstoffer believes, and he wants other growers and winemakers to believe, that the "next level" of Napa Valley wines is what he calls "single-site expression," also known as vineyard-designated wines.

Vineyard-designated wines are not brand new, in fact Guenoc in Lake County has been making a cabernet sauvignon from a Beckstoffer-owned vineyard in St. Helena since 1987. And vineyard-designa-



Andy Beckstoffer hosted a tasting of vineyard-designated wines to illustrate his argument in favor of 'single-site expression' in wines.

tions are common among the great wines of France.

But if Napa is to continue to lead the way in winemaking, "we have to go beyond appellations of origin ... see if we can take the wines to the next level.

tasting of vineyard-designated wines, produced from his vineyards by five different wineries. A small group of wine writers and journalists tasted seven chardonnays, four pinot noirs, and 12 cabernet sauvignons, all produced with grapes grown in specific vineyards in Carneros, St. Helena and Rutherford.

Many of the wines illustrated his point; others revealed the variables that enter the picture, such as a change in winemakers.

"The virtues of the terroir system," said Bob Thompson, a St. Helena wine writer who was at the tasting, "is when the vineyard has something to say ... when you get over the variables of the winemaker talking ... and you can really hear the vineyard talking."

While writers at the tasting gave passing marks to many of the vineyard-designated wines, noting the similarities among vintages, some, syndicated columnist Dan Berger in particular, were skeptical about how well consumers would grasp the

concept.

Still, Beckstoffer believes that "single-site expression will take wine quality to the next level."

And, of course, the growers' prominence in the process has increased, he said. "Growers are now getting more interested in quality than ever before. If you've got bad grapes you can't blend them off. Growers can't hide anymore."

And they won't be able to, if Beckstoffer's idea becomes widely accepted.

"When you get to the highest levels ... we don't stamp 'Rutherford Bench' on the label. You've got to perennially identify the vineyard, and the grower."

There is also the political power of continuing to produce world-class wines on highly-reputable vineyards.

"We can beat the urbanists," said Beckstoffer. "Because we can do it (produce great wines) every year. In the end, what we're really trying to do is save the Napa Valley."