

All the Juicy Details

What would Napa Valley do without Andy Beckstoffer's grapes? BY F. PAUL PACULT

ASK PEOPLE in wine bars to name the most powerful person in northern California's wine country and the majority of them will automatically say, "Robert Mondavi." Certainly, Mondavi's high-profile, heady lifetime achievements and critically acclaimed wines anoint him as the region's most visible personality. But when it comes to sheer behind-the-scenes power in the California North Coast industry, Mondavi loses out to another player. Someone who isn't a household name, and quite likes it that way; who doesn't have his own winery and doesn't for a nanosecond fancy one. He's W. Andrew "Andy" Beckstoffer, proprietor of Beckstoffer Vineyards, with headquarters in lovely St. Helena, Napa Valley.



Beckstoffer may not own a winery, but he sells more premium wine grapes in the North Coast district than anyone else—and wants to sell even more. His family-run company today controls, by his estimate, \$100 million worth of prime vineyard assets in Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties (with 1,000 acres in each), and is one of the largest grape-growers in California.

When I sat down with Beckstoffer in St. Helena, his unassuming, gentlemanly demeanor betrayed his Virginia upbringing. We discussed his position as northern California's most respected independent grower of fine wine grapes, how he became so successful and where California's wine industry is headed.

Sky: How did you turn the \$7,500 that you invested in the early 1970s into a multimillion-dollar vineyard empire?

Beckstoffer: After I got an M.B.A. at Dartmouth in 1966, I worked for Heublein, specializing in the business of buying companies. I was involved in the acquisition of United Vintners, which at that time operated Inglenook and Italian Swiss Colony, then later, Beaulieu Vineyards. In 1969, as an officer of United Vintners, I came out there to Napa but quickly found out that Inglenook and Beaulieu didn't have any fruit [wine grapes] I in the Napa Valley, so I was asked to start a little contract farming company whose job it was to get them fruit.

We did that, but it became clear in time that Heublein [and its investors] did not want to be in the real-estate business, the farming business... so they gave me the job of selling it. After a series of fits and starts, I decided to become an entrepreneur, so I bought the farming company for \$7,500. Over the years, every time we got another couple of nickels together we bought some more land. Today we're cultivating vines in three counties and on over 3,000 acres. We started out just the right time in the early 1970s, when land prices were still reasonable.

So, today, Beckstoffer Vineyards sells all the grapes you grow to more than 40 blue-chip wineries. Yes. We supply over 11,000 tons of grapes even' year to the region's winemakers.

At roughly 700 bottles per ton, that's 7.7 million bottles annually of Beckstoffer-influenced wines. Is this setup of being a grape supplier more suited to you personally than having your own winery?

Yes. This is entrepreneurship more than anything else. I like the growing end of it. I don't like the travel that wine-makers have to endure. I don't like dealing with distributors. I don't like the winemaker dinner thing. I like farmers. I prefer to grow something rather than make it.

I'm fascinated that you've thrived in the California wine industry, a notoriously ego-driven business, for three decades and you still don't yearn to have a physical place where you're crafting your wine and putting it in bottles with your name on them. Having a monument to your work isn't important?

That's right. The thing is, I can't really say that I have less ego than anyone else, but I get my satisfaction in walking around the land that I *own*. When I talk to Europeans they really can't believe that I have only grapes and not a winery. . . .

By not having a winery, we live by a different standard in that we cannot have a bad lot of grapes, because we can't blend it off.... We can't lose money in the vineyard and make it up selling wine, so we have to have better quality.

Also, part of my mission has been to give the grape growers a greater voice in the valley. [In 1975, Beckstoffer helped form the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association and served as founding director.]

Some wineries, though, do place a Beckstoffer Vineyard designation on their label, right, like Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Signorello, Acacia, Merryvale and others?

Yes. They do. That's fine. But my own winery? Not interested.

After all this time of growing premium wine grapes, are you still learning? Do you still tweak the viticultural format?

Absolutely. We're tweaking the format based on the soil, the climate changes, the varieties [grape types], how we prune, how we train the growth on trellis systems. All that.

Winemaking has gone global. One of our major jobs is interpreting all the information that's coming from Australia, New Zealand, South America, South Africa, France and Italy, and then deciding if we can adapt the data to our own soil and climate types. . . . We're getting closer, but it'll never be perfect, because we're dealing with individual pieces of ground.

Are Europeans still most "in the know" when it comes to vineyard management? For instance, say, in the fine science of spacing vines to ensure maximum quality?

They probably know. We don't know fully, that's right. But there's another major difference here. They no longer can experiment. They're locked in by appellation rules or government rules, so they can't adopt a new technology as easily and quickly as we can. We're constantly adopting new technologies.

To what end?

I've said that sometime in the early 21st century Napa Valley will consistently produce the best wine in the world. It'll be red ... probably a cabernet sauvignon.... The reasons are that we have great climate, we have great soils and we have the ability to utilize the world's technology. It's a very American story. We as an industry continue to apply the technology, to harmonize the climate, soils, grape types, water management, vine spacing, trellising, the timing of all vineyard procedures and technology. That's what has carried us to where we are today. But we're not completely there yet. We've got a whole new level to go.

What about the recent spate of diseases that attack the vines, like phylloxera or the latest and seemingly the meanest, Pierce's disease? What's the story there?

We defeated phylloxera in an environmentally sensitive way by grafting disease-resistant shoots onto established vines. So far, Pierce's disease is incurable. We don't want to use a spray. We don't like that solution. Pierce's could be devastating. But once we solve this one, there'll be another one. We have to get used to it.

Do you think that cabernet sauvignon was, is and always will be “The Grape” from California?

No question. Over the years we've grown lots of varieties. But over the last 10 years or more it's been cabernet, cabernet and more cabernet. Cabernet is king within the Napa Valley . . . and probably the entire North Coast, north of San Francisco. There's lots of people who'd argue that today the best red wine in the world is pinot noir from Burgundy... I think California's best shot at having the best wine in the world will involve cabernet, either on its own or in some cabernet-based blend.

Chardonnay? Can you give us some thoughts?

We have a lot of chardonnay in Mendocino County. In fact, we think the best deal in Mendocino is chardonnay. Great flavors. Good sugar.

What about the ever-popular merlot?

Merlot, a nice grape, adds spice to our cabernet. Most people agree, however, that we haven't yet developed a truly great merlot in California. The future of merlot, in my opinion, is in the cooler climate districts, like Napa Carneros, for example. [Carneros] has the potential of taking Napa merlot to the level of Napa cabernet sauvignon. Merlot is a great name, it's easy to say. I'm talking about a whole different class of merlot. Not that fresh and fruity thing anymore.

But, frankly, we won't buy land anymore that doesn't grow top premium cabernet sauvignon. That's all we've been buying for the last 10 years. Clearly, to me, the way we're going best is by going with cabernet, and that's what we grow more of than anything else.

After 30 years of triumph in a difficult industry, is there still fire in the belly?

Oh, yeah. It's still lots of fun. I've wanted to do things my way. I didn't want to report to someone else. I've done that. We'd rather be better than bigger. We used to be nobody and now we're somebody . . . and that's enjoyable because you have an impact. People tend to listen now.

We do hear you, Andy. No need to worry about that.