

Vineyard pedigree outshines winemaker impact

PARTICIPATING PRODUCERS AND BECKSTOFFER VINEYARD SOURCES:

Vineyard George III, Rutherford, CA

Clos du Val, Napa, CA

Bernard Portet,

owner/winemaker

Merryvale Vineyards,

St. Helena, CA

Steve Test, winemaker

Oakville Vineyard, Oakville, CA

Cardinale & Atalon Estates,

Oakville, CA

Charles Thomas,

senior vice-president of

production, operations/

winemaking

Paul Hobbs Winery,

Sebastopol, CA

Andy Smith, associate winemaker

Vineyard No. IV, St. Helena, CA

Guenoc & Langtry Vineyards

& Winery, Middletown, CA

Malcolm Seibly, winemaker

Vineyard X, Oakville, CA

Merryvale Vineyards,

St. Helena, CA

Steve Test, winemaker

Beckstoffer Vineyards

Andy Beckstoffer, owner

Dave Michul,

vice-president, operations

BY Eleanor & Ray Heald
Contributing editors

Vineyard designating, a time-honored European tradition, has burst upon the domestic wine scene.

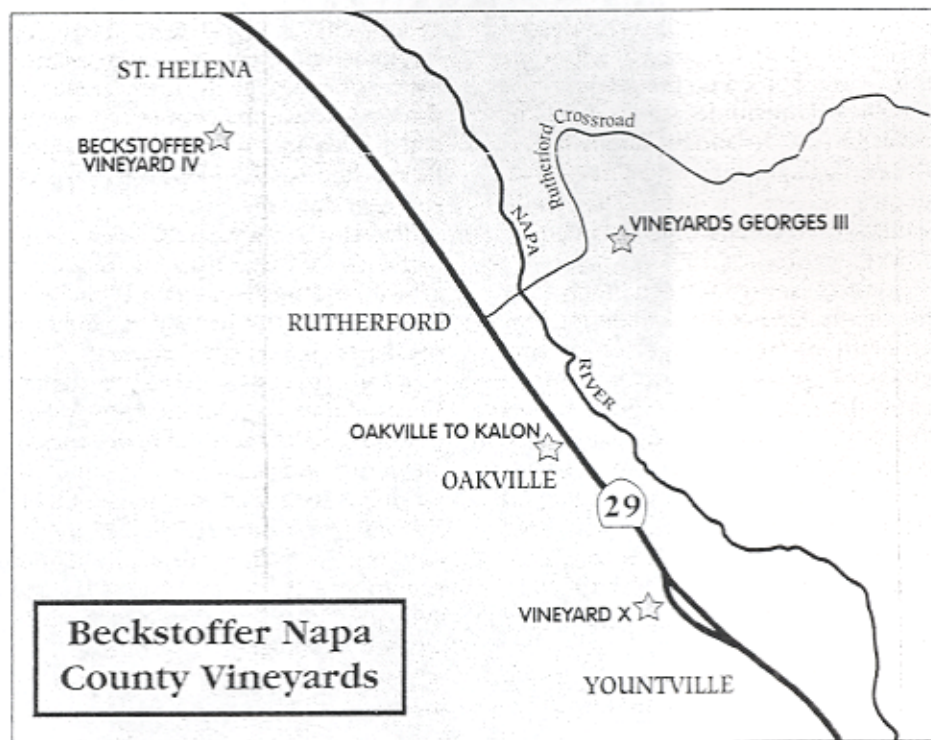
Many such designates have not yet proven their consistency or uniqueness over time. They also lack historical significance. In a given vintage, such untested vineyards may have distinctive characteristics that warrant singular bottling. But will consistency be a problem? Will lack of lineage backfire?

Time will answer these questions. California does, however, have some vineyards with pedigrees. For decades, and independent of the producer, wines from certain soils have developed identifiable aromas and flavor profiles.

PWV focuses on pedigreed Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards owned by Andy Beckstoffer: Vineyard George III in Rutherford (formerly Beaulieu Vineyard No. 3), Beckstoffer Oakville (formerly BV No. 4 owned by Beaulieu Vineyard and part of the renowned To Kalon Vineyard), Beckstoffer No. IV in St. Helena (part of historic holdings of George Beldon Crane), and Vineyard X (formerly part of Vine Hill) in Oakville.

Producers vineyard-designate these wines rather than upgrade a larger Napa Valley blend with the fruit. They explain how vineyard pedigree outshines winemaker impact in the production of Cabernet Sauvignon.

"The longer winemakers work with individual parcels and employ winemaking techniques that showcase a particular *terroir*, we will see more clearly what the land has to offer," says Andy Beckstoffer. "If the land makes a difference, it must be sensed in the aroma and flavors of a wine."



"Viticulturists and winemakers can notch up wine quality from the high level already achieved. The notion of singular wines from a place is a mantle still held by the French, but up for capture in the Napa Valley. Because we have the soil, climate, and freedom to use all the technology available, we have a real shot at that target."

Vineyard George III

Beckstoffer has owned the former Beaulieu Vineyard No. 3, situated off Silverado Trail in Rutherford, CA, since 1988. Georges de Latour, founder of Beaulieu Vineyard, purchased the 225-acre Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard in 1923. Beckstoffer has farmed the vineyard since 1971. Joined with another 25-acre parcel, the combined 250-acre vineyard borders Caymus Vineyards and is now known as Vineyard George III, after the original owner.

Between 1989 and 1993, Beckstoffer replanted the gravelly loam soils in the Perkins, Pleasanton Series using UCD Clones 4 and 7, Clone 6 (Argentine origin), and 337 (ENTAV) for clonal diversity expressed in blocks. Due to a nematode problem and fan leaf virus, only 039-16 rootstock proved suitable.

Clone 4 was of particular interest because it was disease-free and not heat-treated. "We don't know what heat treatment does to vines and to varietal character," Beckstoffer maintains. "I believe that clones that have not been heat-treated more clearly express the varietal and the site in which they are grown."

A similar scenario exists for Clone 6, often referred to as the Jackson Clone, one of the oldest Cabernet Sauvignon clones in California. It was rediscovered in the University of California's Jackson field station in the 1960s. Long-disregarded as too low-yielding, Clone 6 was identified as producing superior and distinctive wines in clonal trials in the Napa Valley in the 1980s.

Clone 7 is the highest yielding clone. Clones 4 and 337 are lower yielding, but this can vary with the soil and chosen trellis system. Lowest yielding is Clone 6 because crop load is often reduced by poor flowering.

Deep, well-drained alluvial fans run 50 to 60 inches deep. Vines on the GDC trellis in deeper soils are spaced 11x6. Those on the VSP trellis in less vigorous soils are spaced 8x6.

Gravel and deep clay streaks run through the vineyard, requiring canopy manipulation and vigor reduction to raise the fruit quality. "Each year, we farm these blocks slightly differently in a process of fine tuning," says Dave Michul, vice-president of Beckstoffer Vineyards operations.

Notching up George III

In response to winemaker feedback, Michul began to retrofit portions of the Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard in the 1997 growing season. Fruit quality was being compromised by canopy management within both the GDC and VSP.

Shoot positioning with the GDC was evaluated for canopy management, and opening up the canopy mid-

dle was discontinued. "Textbook farming of GDC has shoots raked over and folded down to expose the fruit. For Cabernet Sauvignon grown in George III, the traditional GDC does not work as well because the fruit can receive excessive sunburn," Michul contends.

"Now, we do not rake the shoots over, we allow them to grow the way they would naturally. Along with that, we devigorate the vines by incorporating cover crops, such as Champion Mix, a low-growing fescue. Now, vines appear to be in better balance, and we've experienced better fruit quality.

"What we do may be viewed as a holistic form of farming. We're not looking at the canopy only. Cover crops have become an important part of vine balance. We're not trying to force Cabernet to grow downward, which it does not want to do. While Cabernet does not roll over like Merlot, the canopy does open naturally. With shoot

B

positioning and some leaf removal, we have the desired speckled sunlight on the clusters without direct heat."

Michul also notes that he's changed the fertilizing and watering programs. At 1% to 2% veraison, KTS (potassium thiosulfate which is 25% potassium) is applied to assist the vine in producing better anthocyanins in the fruit and higher sugar levels in the leaves. Overall, this leads to better phenolics in harvested fruit.

"Farming a vineyard cannot focus on a single element such as the canopy," Michul maintains. "It must focus on the whole picture — multiple factors impact fruit quality."

Annually, pruning weight ratios in the window of 5 to 7 lbs. per vine are achieved. But Michul says it depends on the area of a particular block. The same ratio for Clone 6 has a different meaning for Clone 4, and in one part of a vineyard compared to another.

Winemaker interplay

To raise grape quality even higher, in some of the more vigorous soils (yielding the equivalent of 7 to 9 tons per acre of harvested grapes) some GDC has been retrofitted (at \$3,000 per acre) to a lyre trellis. That is being evaluated with Charles Thomas at Cardinale for use in the Atalon brand.

"We've now made wine from the retrofitted vines for two years," Thomas comments. "With any good winegrowing trial, three years of information is needed to predict a pattern."

"From vines in more fertile soil, it appears that we are getting a little less herbaceous character with the lyre than the standard GDC. As Dave said, one of the advantages of the GDC, when it's farmed correctly, is speckled sunlight. With a semi-vertical lyre, there is the downside of exposing the fruit to too much direct sunlight."

Beckstoffer adds, "We no longer manage for Cabernet Sauvignon. We manage a particular piece of land. When the vineyard was planted, we were trying to achieve diversity in wine flavors. Yields are something you just get. The goal is to achieve higher quality and hopefully higher yield with limited downside factors."

Thomas adds that what the future holds is not just site-specific viticulture, but vintage-specific farming. This includes the methods employed either pro-actively or responsively to adapt to the growing season. This thinking is an outgrowth of the 1998 vintage in Napa Valley. Since then, farming of vineyard-specific wines has stopped being a mere set of numbers.

While Atalon has not yet released a commercial bottling labeled Vineyard George III, Clos du Val began labeling as such with the 1997 vintage. "Beckstoffer Vineyards and Clos du Val have had a 25-year relationship," Clos du Val owner/winemaker Bernard Portet reports. "We bought fruit from George III in both the 1995 and 1996 vintages to assess the potential of a vineyard-designate bottling. We had a good understanding by 1997 and were able to release a wine with distinct vineyard character."

For some years and concluding with the 1998 vintage, Merryvale released a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot that was designated Beckstoffer Vineyards Selection. Winemaker Steve Test believes it was not the best articulation, since grapes were sourced from a number of Beckstoffer Vineyards, not solely George III, and included Merlot from vineyards in two distinct viticultural areas.

"Conceptually and philosophically," Test maintains, "it was kind of a mush. We are now working on vineyard-designating George III Cabernet Sauvignon from a 4.7-acre parcel at the eastern edge of George III, adjacent to Silverado Trail, which is exclusively Clone 6."

"We knew the history of this parcel before we were able to buy the grapes, and it performed well. From the 1999 vintage, it is again showing well, and I

B

fully anticipate that it will be a unique bottling for Merryvale.

"At this time in its development, the 2000 wine is dense and concentrated, with excellent balance and fine tannins. The 2000 vintage does not seem to be quite as good for Cabernet Sauvignon as 1999, in general. The 1999 wines are a little viscous, regardless of vineyards.

"But there will always be issues vintage to vintage. If the wine doesn't perform in a particular year, then it won't be bottled as a vineyard designate."

Beckstoffer Oakville Vineyard

The former Beaulieu Vineyard No. 4, located across Highway 29 from Opus One (Mondavi-Rothschild venture) in Oakville, was purchased by Beckstoffer in 1993 and called Oakville Vineyard. The 89-acre parcel, replanted by Beckstoffer in 1994, was part of the original 240-acre To Kalon Vineyard, first planted in 1865 by viticultural pioneer Hamilton Crabb. Loam soils 50 to 60 inches deep in the vineyard are well-drained.

In 1940, Georges de Latour bought the 89-acre piece of To Kalon vineyard, replanted it, and named it BV No. 4. From then until 1993, it was owned by Beaulieu Vineyard and was used in its top Cabernet Sauvignon program.

Beginning in 1994, Beckstoffer's Oakville Vineyard was totally replanted with the concept of a Bordeaux varietal blend in mind. The decision was made not to use Malbec, but to plant 80% to Cabernet Sauvignon Clones 6, 4, and 337. The balance is 10% Merlot (Clones #1 and #3), 5% Petit Verdot, and 5% Cabernet Franc to offer winemakers a spice rack to select from and create complexity as well as personality in their wines.

Vines oriented north-south were spaced 8x7 on VSP in the replanting. Later, and extending to 1997, 6x7 spacing was used to complete the project. This spacing has become the Beckstoffer standard. The same nematode problem as experienced in George III plagues this vineyard and restricts rootstock choice to 039-16.

Because it gives both the viticulturist and winemaker the best of both

worlds, Michul prefers north-south row orientation. However, he notes that it is necessary to handle VSP differently. No hedging is done on the western side of the canopy, and leaves or laterals are not pulled.

In 1997, Charles Thomas picked the east and west side of the vine at different times. "Our adaptations created a more uniform crop so that this type of situation would not have to be repeated," Michul observes.

Thomas explains that "the east side of the vine lagged behind the west side in anthocyanin development. West side berries had begun to shrivel. With the new canopy management, both sides are more uniform."

In some areas of the vineyard, devigorating cover crops are used, but in other areas, cover crops are used only to protect against winter erosion.

Blocks planted in 1994 and 1995 are well established. With the 1996 and 1997 plantings, Michul is still gauging the vineyard to judge natural tendencies and what he will do to grow the best quality fruit. "With the loss of AXR-1, we must use 039-16 rootstock as we did in George III because of fan leaf virus. It has taken us time to understand its idiosyncrasies," Michul contends. "For one thing, 039-16 does not like to be water stressed.

"At Beckstoffer, we believe that basic viticulture has been forgotten in the chase for what's new. As we plot strategies to improve fruit quality, we attempt to take each block back to basic viticulture first, before we consider changing pruning methods, irrigation, or other farming techniques.

"We're conscious that this is a newer planting and still evolving. We know, for instance, the bud count window at pruning this year, but that may change next year, depending on our observations during the growing season. With one vine, it may be 20 buds and another vine 18 or 16. We judge by vine appearance.

"Each vineyard and vineyard block is different, and we employ a number of techniques to have each block express its uniqueness within a given vineyard. We believe we know what the vine can do in its particular location."

B

Due principally to eutypa, the cordon for VSP at Beckstoffer Oakville and all vineyards in the company is being developed as bilateral. Because unilateral cordons promote poor spur positions, Beckstoffer is in favor of bilateral cordons. Bilateral will also fill the canopy better and offer improved vine balance.

Thomas suggests that when a unilateral cordon is too long, the Brix difference on bunches farther from — compared to those closer to — the trunk are unacceptably different. Additionally, there is also diversity within a unilateral as far as bud break and bloom.

"The 6x7 spacing has moved the rows closer together and the vines farther apart in the row," Beckstoffer adds. "The problem is not so much the unilateral cordon, which may very well work in another vineyard, but that it's not suited to our seven-foot vine spacing. There are no panaceas here. We're not saying this is the correct way,

and that way is incorrect. It depends on soil composition and climate.

"The major consideration in any vineyard should be uniformity. We, as Dave said, do not want to pick east and west sides of the vine at different times. We want all bunches around the Brix level average desired by the winemakers."

Beckstoffer Vineyard No. IV

Owned by Beckstoffer since 1983 but planted in 1975, the 21.8-acre Beckstoffer Vineyard No. IV, located west of Highway 29 and southwest of St. Helena at the end of Sulphur Springs Avenue, is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and two acres of Merlot.

On an alluvial bench, the parcel is sloped slightly to the east, 25 feet above Sulfur Creek at the mouth of Sulfur Canyon, and laying up against the western hills. Soils are well-drained sandy loam with a significant amount of small stones and gravel to a 50- to 60-inch depth. It has low vigor poten-

tial, with low nitrogen and high calcium and potassium content.

Situated off the west valley floor, the vineyard receives morning sun before the center and eastern edges of the valley. In late afternoon, when the sun goes behind the western hills, Beckstoffer IV is in the shadow, while the rest of the valley is still receiving sunshine. Therefore, it warms up and cools off earlier than its central and eastern valley counterparts.

Temperature influences are similar to the rest of the Rutherford/St. Helena area, where during the ripening season in late summer, days can warm up into the 90° to 95°F range, then cool down into the 50s and 60s at night, for a 40° swing.

Planted to Clone 7 on St. George and some AXR-1 rootstock, the vineyard, spaced 8x8, is spur-pruned on a bilateral cordon, using a standard single-wire "T" trellis. The original vineyard was trained lower to the ground, so post-purchase Beckstoffer raised the cordons and the fruiting zone to allow more airflow through the canopy to improve control of powdery mildew. The vineyard ripens relatively early in the season for Cabernet Sauvignon, and although it shows spotty signs of phylloxera, it has not been replanted.

Guenoc has been making Cabernet Sauvignon as a vineyard-designated reserve wine from this property since 1987. Winemaker Malcolm Seibly has worked with the vineyard's fruit since 1996. Out of all the vineyards from which Guenoc purchases grapes in the North Coast, he considers Beckstoffer IV to be the most naturally in balance.

Michul explains that the canopy needs little manipulation due to good spur positioning and proper shoot growth. Pruning for the number of spurs and buds per vine is done by visual examination in the field. Crop levels are light, averaging 2.5 to 3.5 tons per acre, with small clusters and small berries. Second crop, if any, is removed in the summer.

Due to a lack of water availability, establishing irrigation in this vineyard required a significant commitment. In 2000, a new well was dug to gain versatility in drip irrigation sets so hang time could be prolonged.

"Now, the drip system provides just enough to replace rainfall in a dry year to prevent undue stress from heat," Seibly reports. "The combination of all the factors mentioned produces a condition where the vines switch from the 'vegetative' growth phase of the summer into the fruit-ripening stage of the fall at an earlier point compared to other vineyards, which may be carrying a bigger crop load or are irrigated more frequently."

Prior to the new well, a manual fertilizing program under the drippers helped to keep the 30-year-old vines healthy. Now vines are fertilized through the drip system. In 2000, vines were also artificially mulched with straw to aid retention of soil moisture.

Seibly also notes that "Beckstoffer IV consistently produces Cabernet Sauvignon of great distinction and character. The wines are typically very dark in color with unmistakable open and generous aromatics and flavors of black fruits and spices that are a constant from year to year, regardless of the vintage."

"While it is arguable that virtually any red variety would produce outstanding wine if grown on the Beckstoffer IV vineyard site, it is an ideal match for Cabernet Sauvignon, yielding wines of remarkable class and breed from one vintage to the next."

Beckstoffer Vineyard X

In 1996, Beckstoffer bought this 45-acre vineyard in Oakville (part of the Vine Hill Ranch) from the Kelham family. However, the purchase did not give him the right to the Vine Hill pedigree name, so for the time being, it is called Vineyard X.

Beginning with vintage 1999, Merryvale will vineyard-designate Cabernet Sauvignon made from a block of old vines still remaining, while the site is undergoing a replanting program using similar schematics already discussed.

"This is a great site, and long-term, I have confidence that fruit from replanted vines will be as good or better than the results we are now getting from the old block," says Test. "I predict this, because for many years, Merryvale

has purchased exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon from the Vine Hill Ranch."

Evolution to a style

Beckstoffer contends that he does not "sell Cabernet Sauvignon" from one of his pedigreed vineyards. Wineries purchase specific rows in designated blocks. "The contract probably started out that we agreed on specific tonnage from the vineyard," he explains. "But once the wine was made, winemakers asked to see the vineyard section that was purchased. Over time, we've evolved together to create a contract that specifies blocks and rows."

Annually, Beckstoffer requests that wineries purchasing grapes submit wines for a block tasting of approximately 100 different wines. Winemakers rate the wines and are able to fine-tune future purchases based on the tasting.

Thomas explains his experience with Beckstoffer's Oakville Vineyard. Some of the oldest replanted blocks (A2 which is Clone 4 and B2, Clone 337) have similar soil profiles, but produce two distinctly different wines. Clone 4 is consistently more tannic than Clone 337.

"As a winemaker, I exercise different techniques, such as extended skin contact or not, with the two blocks," notes Thomas. "Because I do not believe that the number of pumpovers really matters, this regime stays the same regardless of clone or block. I also tend not to adjust a peak fermentation temperature. Ultimately, it is the *terroir* factor that is showcased in the wine. Winemaker response is only fine tuning."

Seibly explains that to have the option of lengthening fermentation and maceration for an average of 25 days, he always allocates winery space to handle Beckstoffer No. IV fruit.

To create more building blocks for the final blend, Seibly requests earlier harvest of some blocks, with the remainder of the vineyard typically harvested about three days later.

Winemaking techniques are essentially the same for both lots, but depending on assessment of the fruit, Seibly may choose to cold soak or

6

select a different yeast for one and not the other. Once dryness is achieved, the fermentors are tasted daily to determine the optimal time to drain and press. Wine is transferred to one-third new and two-thirds second-fill French oak barrels after pressing.

Paul Hobbs Winery's associate winemaker Andy Smith reports on the winery's handling of four blocks and two clones from Beckstoffer's Oakville Vineyard. Clone 4 and 337 are handled similarly in the winery.

"Near the end of fermentation, the distinct differences between the clones are most noticeable," Smith says. "Depending on individual characteristics, we may modify our extraction processes — draining and pressing.

"Tannin extraction and desired mouthfeel are obtained during the active and latter phases of uninoculated fermentation. To obtain maximum aeration, a combination of

punch-downs and pump-overs are used. Pressing is done after about three weeks of skin contact that includes three to four days of cold soak. Wine is transferred to barrel immediately."

Winemaking decisions

"All Cabernet Sauvignon at Merryvale is treated similarly," Test acknowledges. "As time progresses, the wines are, however, evaluated for barrel selection."

Is he then letting the fruit speak? "You'll never hear me say that," Test responds. "Decisions impacting wine character begin at harvest and end at bottling. Each one is important and can change the personality of a wine.

"Obviously, there is something essential to the character of the wine that comes from the vineyard. But how the wine is made has a large impact, also. If the same fruit is vinified completely differently, the wine will probably be completely different.

Through which wine will the fruit be speaking?

"If you're asking, 'Is it important to allow a vineyard character to be perceived?' then I'd have to say that I do everything possible to preserve this in every phase of winemaking, but what I do depends on the vintage.

"It's a real swamp when we try to examine the true character of a vineyard. The true character of a vineyard is in the quality and characteristics of the fruit delivered to a winery. The winery is then a big lens through which the fruit can be viewed in multiple ways.

"What I value in characteristics that come from the vineyard are black fruits, proper tannin balance, and lack of veggie or herbaceous characters. These show up in the wine and are different from each vineyard source, whether that's George III or Vineyard X."

Portet contends that his goal is to make the four or five tanks of Cabernet Sauvignon from George III the best it can be. "Even though two tanks can originate from the same block with identical clones, every winemaker knows that they develop differently. Because we've purchased the same blocks for a number of years, we now know which ones do not react as positively to extended maceration, and we monitor this with daily tasting.

"We blend the different George III tanks each year to try and maintain a consistent style. The wine then spends between 18 to 22 months in mostly new French oak barrels. Apart from harvest, the key decision is when to press, because it significantly impacts the fruit, structure, and overall character of the wine."

Delivering

Winemakers interviewed acknowledge Steve Test's conclusion: "It's significant that a vineyard-designated wine comes from a special place, but it must deliver. The wine must be perceived by a consumer as a special, excellent, delicious, and great wine. That's the final and most important criteria for wine from a pedigreed vineyard." ■