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From the start, the man had vision

"We've been able to make people understand that land is a business asset. More importantly, it's a heritage, a national treasure. The preservation of the Napa Valley is one of the few things worth a career. We're basically stewards. The equation is that great grapes make great wine, but you can't rape the land doing it. I'm not sure I got that very early on, but I'm there now..."

– Andy Beckstoffer, 2002

- ROAD TO INNOVATION:

To modify a line of Mr. Coppola's: accusing Andy Beckstoffer of being a hard-nosed businessman is like handing out speeding tickets at the Indianapolis 500

by Charles McDermid, [Editor](#)

At this point in time — let's call it mid-way through his career — the legacy of Andy Beckstoffer as a pivotal player in the Napa Valley wine industry is as firmly established as the Mayacamas Mountains.

Simply put, he's had a hand in every major innovation — viticulture-wise, business-wise or otherwise — in the last 30 years. Do the math: Beckstoffer Vineyards has produced over 140,000 tons of Napa Valley grapes since the 1970s. With a yield of roughly 700 bottles per ton, that's enough wine to turn your front teeth mauve just thinking about it.

But things weren't always this way.

There was a time when Beckstoffer woke up every morning and drove from vineyard to vineyard overseeing production with the Russian uber-enologist Andre Tchelistcheff. The scene is easy to imagine: a cigarette dangling ever-present from Tchelistcheff's lips, a younger Beckstoffer electric with enthusiasm.

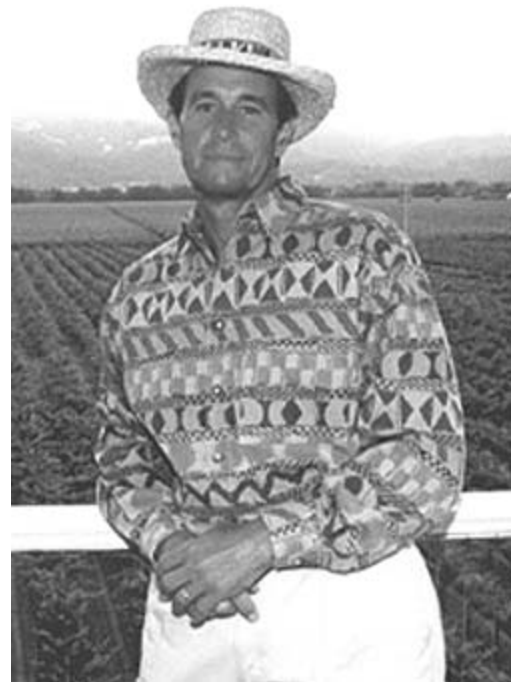
It was the 1970s — heady days in the nascent Napa Valley wine industry — and Beckstoffer was playing catch up; attempting to cram painstaking centuries of the art and science of winemaking into a few short growing seasons.

Characteristically, he pulled it off — somehow. And when you hear Beckstoffer speak of the early days — of diseased vines, of burnt tar in open buckets and atrocious, illegal housing conditions — it's remarkable to note just how far things have come.

The names that inhabit his recollections read like a viticultural roll call of every significant vintner, grape grower, mechanic, engineer and vineyard specialist of the last half century: Jess Manuel, Charles Wagner, Andy Pelissa, Steve Yates, Jack Christiansen, Roy Harris, Drew Aspegren, Bob Steinhauer, Joe Heitz, the list extends so far one could never capture them all.

"He (Beckstoffer) is absolutely a key individual," said longtime Supervisor Mel Varrelman. "He's one of the largest grape growers and he was also one of the key individuals in framing the winery definition ordinance and establishing the fact that Napa County not only remain a premier wine growing area — but also continue growing rather than importing it's product. This is crucial to the Napa Valley."

Drew Aspegren, who began working for Beckstoffer in 1974, believes Beckstoffer always had an inkling of what to was to come.



"I think that, as strange as it sounds, he had when he started a pretty good vision of what it could be," Aspegren said.

"I remember years and years ago that he said we'd be selling land for hundreds of thousands of dollars — and this was a long time ago. He had that figured out and he seemed to be willing to push himself and his clients to do cutting edge things; the first drip systems, the first trellis systems, how he put contracts together and how he managed vintner and grower relationships. It was really a blue print for what's going on today.

The praise is high, but Beckstoffer is quick to deflect such accolades to those around him.

"Clearly it wasn't him alone," said Guy Kay, a veteran Napa Valley grapegrower and political office holder. "But it always takes somebody to stand up and say 'this is a good idea.' Andy has definitely provided that kind of leadership."

He's not done yet.

"Andy is one of our most delightful advisory directors," said Sandy Ellis, executive director of the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association and Farm Bureau. "He understands every nuance of the grape growing world. He quietly drops pearls of wisdom into our often animated discussion of the board. He's passionate about promoting the premium quality of Napa Valley grapes.

He's certainly a tower of the industry."

"The grapes are in the ground and the people are on the ground to consistently make the best wine in the world. If we, this generation, could make that statement, that again, is worth a career."

– **Andy Beckstoffer, 2002**

BIO BOX:

- **Background:** Native of Richmond, Virginia. Attends Virginia Tech on football scholarship; graduates with degree in engineering; marries childhood sweetheart, Betty; joins Army.
- **1966-1967:** Graduates with an M.B.A. from Dartmouth, joins Heublein, Inc. as Director of Acquisitions and recommends entering California's wine industry.
- **1969-1970:** Negotiates purchase of Beaulieu Vineyards; moves family to California; embarks on study of grapegrowing business and techniques.
- **1970-1980:** Installs first irrigation system in Napa Valley; helps form NVGGA; forges bottle prices formula; Beckstoffer Vineyards formed.
- **1980-1990:** Purchases vineyards in Mendocino, Napa and Lake Counties; leads NVGGA in obtaining winery definition ordinance.
- **1990-present:** Beckstoffer Vineyards is largest independent family owned vineyard company on North Coast.

- Debunking the myths:

A neighbor of 33 years who's raised five children in the Napa Valley, was awarded Citizen of the Year, and just happened to be a pivotal player in wine and business

by **Charles McDermid**, [Editor](#)

It's something akin to a cardboard lookalike that the journalists trot out to represent Andy Beckstoffer. It's a cliché by now; a facile representation that goes a little like this:

Southern accent, youthful looking, soft-spoken, all business.

In 1997 Wine Spectator wrote: "His disarmingly soft Southern drawl and gentle manner belie a reputation for tough, sure-footed negotiating skills."

In 1999 Vineyard and Winery penned this description: "...looks younger than his 54 years. Tall, tanned and

slender with an ever-present smile and the softest of Southern accents.”

Author James Conaway in his controversial 1990 book, “Napa,” went as far as to write: “He had a soft, Southern accent, large brown eyes, and a nose that gave him a slightly clownish look.”

It goes on like this. The out-of-town writers compose the Beckstoffer portrait with the broadest of strokes, then launch directly into the extensive laundry list of his accomplishments. While some of these surface observations are true, when it all shakes out, the reader is left with an impression more myth than man — a picture as reductive as it is two-dimensional.

And this is a mistake. For if you’ve lived in the Napa Valley for any length of time — or have had the pleasure of a casual moment with Beckstoffer — then it’s easy to realize that there’s more to this man than a good tan, Tidewater inflections and a tremendous career in the wine industry.

For one thing, this man once called a “corporate barracuda” is a fundamental family man. Beckstoffer married his childhood sweetheart, Betty, in 1960 and has raised five children. He has sat on the Board of Trustees of Justin Siena High School and was instrumental in developing an agricultural program at the school. The Beckstoffers were honored as 2001 St. Helena Citizens of the Year.

“The Beckstoffers were nominated by several parties, all of which were pretty comprehensive as to why they should be considered for the honor,” said Rex Stults, CEO of the St. Helena Chamber of Commerce. “The chamber board of directors quickly came to a consensus that the Beckstoffers as a couple deserve the honor for all that they have done in St. Helena, in the wine industry, beyond the valley and most importantly in the local school system. Andy and Betty compliment each other so well. They are a vital asset to our community.”

Furthermore, Beckstoffer’s employees, of which there are many, remain intensely dedicated.

“I came to the valley in 1974 to work for him,” said civil engineer Drew Aspegren. “I still feel pretty loyal to him. As far as a place to grow professionally and to work the conditions were great. Up until that time and probably even now, they were the best working conditions I’ve had in terms of treating employees.”

Volker Eisele has known Beckstoffer for 27 years. Though diametrically opposed politically, the two have found themselves fighting side-by-side against a number of land-use issues. “Andy is exceptionally bright and an excellent businessman,” said Eisele. “Over the years he has understood that agriculture and land protection are essential to the Napa Valley and he has put his money where his mouth is. That is extremely admirable. He has clearly understood what is needed here and he’s not afraid to make a stand for what’s important. This is what makes him an outstanding citizen.”

Finally, the physical description of Beckstoffer deserves an update.

The so-called “serious businessman” is downright funny; able to break into good-natured, spontaneous profanity. He’s a sports nut, loyal to the Bay Area teams and Big East football. And while he’s never claimed to be a farmer, there is an agrarian vibe that comes off him, a vision of trellises, tractors and such. His six decades have awarded him a well-earned sangfroid and a wolfish grin that’s equal parts mischief and good cheer. And he does, as is so often and aptly documented, have a Southern accent.

“He’s a family man,” Eisele said. “He has children and his children carry on the business. This is what’s important, to have families staying here and making sure the next generation has land left to farm.”