

# Beckstoffer Looks To Lake For Cabernet

Larry Walker

Andy Beckstoffer farms more than 2,000 acres of vines in Napa and Mendocino counties on California's North Coast. More than a dozen wineries use Beckstoffer fruit in vineyard-designated wines and more than 50 premium wineries buy his grapes. So when Beckstoffer began planting grapes in Lake County, the wine world took notice.

In 1997, Beckstoffer bought a 632-acre property which he calls Amber Knolls, which was planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet franc and Petit Verdot. In 1998 he added the 84-acre Red Hills Vineyard for

Cabernet Sauvignon and in 1999 the 400-acre Crimson Ridge Vineyard, which will also be planted to Cabernet Sauvignon. All the vineyards are in the proposed Red Hills American Viticultural Area.

Why would a grower with famous vineyards in Napa Carneros, Oakville and Rutherford start planting grapes in Lake County? The answer is Cabernet Sauvignon.

"We think North Coast Cabernet is exciting. You can grow Cabernet better north of San Francisco than anywhere in the world and Lake County has simply been overlooked," Beckstoffer said in a recent interview.

Beckstoffer cited several attractions

in Lake, including the hillside soils—sandy and well-drained—and, not to be overlooked, relative land costs compared to Napa. In Napa, raw land can cost between \$70,000 and \$100,000 per acre. That initial investment can be halved in Lake County.

"You do need to go above 2,000 feet to find the best soils for Cabernet. I would say over 2,000 and below 2,400," he said. "You have to be picky."

Can Lake County match Napa for quality?

"It isn't about whether you can

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challenge Napa. But look, in the last few years, \$25 Napa Cabernet has gone to \$40. We can still make an outstanding Cabernet in Lake for \$25, doing the same viticulture we do in Napa, which means doing it right," Beckstoffer said.

In his Lake County plantings, Beckstoffer is using precision farming techniques that can track irrigation and nutrient needs in blocks as small as seven acres. The plantings



**Influential grapegrower Andy Beckstoffer began adding Lake County vineyards to his portfolio in 1997.**

were done using satellite technology with rows based on elevation, plotted to a few centimeters. He spent two years doing the research before the first vines were planted.

He already has contracts to sell grapes to 11 wineries, including Caymus, Chalone and Stag's Leap. The grapes are priced to focus on the \$20-a-bottle market.

Beckstoffer says that by having grapes in three regions, it gives his organization more depth and adds to the ability to take risks and to

experiment with different varieties, different clones and rootstocks and different viticultural techniques.

He likes Mendocino Cabernet but said it was getting tough to find good land for Cabernet there, another reason for the investment in Lake County. "I also like working with Mendocino Chardonnay," he said.

Napa, he said, is going to get better.

"The thing to remember is that because of *phylloxera*, there are a lot of new plantings. Now, 2002 looks like a fabulous year, and the vines are still young. As the vines get a little age on them, the wines will be even better," Beckstoffer said.

He pointed out that the information available now to growers gives them much more knowledge of a particular site and how grapes adapt to that site. "We can look at the microclimate of a bunch of grapes now and tell how much sun is getting to them, rather than how hot the vine is. In the next 10 years, we will continue to develop new information technology to learn more about what is happening in the soils and water use. And all of that technology is being applied to Lake County, right from the start," he said.

Beckstoffer grows several hundred acres of Cabernet in the Rutherford AVA, which should put him on

good terms with that elusive "Rutherford Dust."

"You can define it in two ways," he said. "In terms of *terroir*, the total is more than the sum of the parts. If you go back to the old days at Beaulieu, André Tchelistcheff was always interested in the vineyards. It all comes down to an orientation to the earth, the combination of elements that makes Rutherford a little different than Oakville. Secondly, there is the attitude. If you have the attitude that you are going to make great

wines, that interacts with the *terroir*."

He added, "The wines we are producing now are different than the wines from the '80s. But there is still a definite sense of place." 🍷