

WINE & SPIRITS

Vineyards with pedigrees

A historic land registry seeks to preserve Napa Valley's agrarian identity — and its marketability.

By ROD SMITH
Special to The Times

ABOUT 170 years ago, a mountain man named George Yount settled in central Napa Valley on a large tract of land granted by the Mexican government. Between hunting grizzly bears and fighting the native Wappo and La Jota tribes, he established a farm that included a small vineyard — Napa Valley's first grapevines.

Today three Yountville-area landowners claim that Yount's vineyard site is on their land. Alas, the vines are long gone. But the site may yet be located, and one of the landowners certified as the proud inheritor of its tradition by the new Napa Valley Historic Vineyard Registry.

Napa Valley is not the best place in California to produce fine wine. It's merely one of the best. Yet Napa Valley is synonymous with California wine all over the world, thanks to two deceptively simple things: focus and public relations. The Napa Valley wine community is committed, down to the individual level, to preserving its primarily agrarian identity. And its members spend an inordinate amount of time, money and political capital to do so.

The Napa Valley Historic Vineyard Registry is the latest example of that. It's not splashy, yet by quietly establishing historical vineyard pedigrees for many parcels of land in the valley, it's sure to impede non-viticultural development in the future — and may have a similar effect on other California wine districts, such as Sonoma County, which has a viticultural history even longer than Napa's.

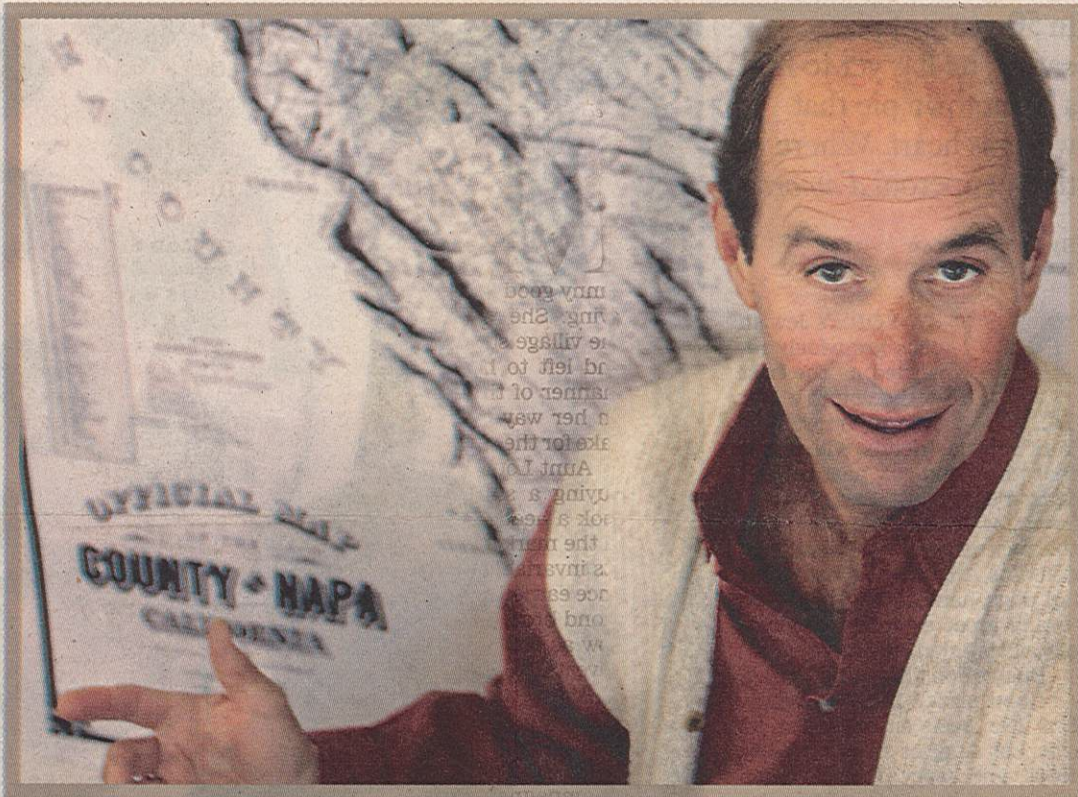
It also may prove to be controversial. By creating what amounts to an aristocratic class of vineyard, the registry will add a new element to the already confusing barrage of information that wine producers use to woo the consumer.

A project of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers, or NVG, a growers' advocacy organization, the registry was conceived by Andy Beckstoffer, who co-founded NVG in 1975 and is one of the valley's largest non-winery-affiliated grape growers. It aims to substantiate Napa Valley's long and distinguished history as a wine region by certifying the current ownership of properties that were known to be vineyards more than a century ago.

The vines have vanished from some parcels of land, and others are buried under buildings and parking lots. But many, such as Niebaum-Coppola, Schramsberg, and Crane Family Vineyards, to choose just a few, are still producing notable wines.

Says Beckstoffer, who chairs the registry's review committee, "I want to bring focus to our history and vineyards, and not just to our Wine Spectator scores."

On the surface, the registry, which carries none of the legal implications of a state historical designation, is simply an attempt to reconnect modern wine-centric Napa Valley with a previous golden era.



ON THE MAP: Says Andy Beckstoffer, "I want to bring focus to our history and vineyards."

California wine — which dates from the mid-19th century — has two histories, two distinct periods divided by a 50-year disconnect caused by a pair of catastrophic events. One of those events was Prohibition (1920-1933), which put the state's wine producers (except those making Communion wine for churches) out of business.

Prohibition followed a devastating infestation of phylloxera (circa 1880-1900), a root-eating aphid that had wiped out most of the vineyards in France and almost did the same in California before resistant rootstocks were introduced in the 1890s.

An industry sleeps

SO an industry that had begun in the 1850s — and that by the 1880s had shown every sign of taking the world by storm with its acclaimed, award-winning wines — suddenly went dormant for half a century. Even after Prohibition was repealed, the industry awoke slowly, not regaining international prominence until the 1970s.

"There are a lot of folks who think Napa Valley started in the 1970s," says Napa County agricultural commissioner and registry review committee member Dave Whitmer. "But it's been an agricultural gem for a long time."

"Let's face it, Napa County finds itself under continual pressure from growth and development. [The registry] is one way to help people keep a sense of this place as an agricultural place, and keep in front of people the need to protect it."

A heightened awareness of the land's rich history, Whitmer reasons, may make residents less likely to approve the kind of non-agrarian development that has plagued other noted wine districts, such as Livermore Valley and the Russian River Valley.

In fact, there's a little more to it than that. Beckstoffer came up with the Historic Vineyard Registry when he was in the middle of litigation, defending his commercial stake in the historic Napa Valley vineyard called To Kalon (also spelled To-Kalon and Tokalon) against Robert Mondavi Winery.

Beckstoffer and Robert Mondavi Winery both own pieces of

To Kalon (the historical spelling), which was first planted by Napa Valley wine pioneer H.W. Crabb in 1868 and which became one of California's most famous vineyards before Prohibition. (The University of California also owns 20 acres.)

Mondavi was able to trademark the names To-Kalon (Mondavi's spelling) and To-Kalon Vineyard, which gave it the right to market wines under those names without necessarily using grapes from the original Crabb property. Tim Mondavi, quoted in the St. Helena Star, said, "We could use grapes from Nairobi if we wanted to."

In 2002, Mondavi sued vintner Fred Schrader in U.S. District Court for trademark infringement and unfair competition, over Schrader's vineyard-designated 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon made with grapes from Beckstoffer's portion of Tokalon (Beckstoffer's spelling).

If successful, the suit would have prevented anyone other than Mondavi from using the name To Kalon, in any spelling, on a wine label. It would also have set a precedent for trademarking the name of a specific piece of property as a brand.

Mondavi lost the suit. Now some half a dozen vintners are producing vineyard-designated ToKalon wines from Beckstoffer's parcel. The stakes are high: Mondavi's To-Kalon Vineyard Cabernet sells for around \$150 a bottle. Schrader's ToKalon Cabernet sold out at \$75 as soon as it was released through a mailing list. Paul Hobbs Cabernet from Beckstoffer-ToKalon costs \$185 a bottle, which means Hobbs pays Beckstoffer \$18,500 a ton for ToKalon grapes.

Then, in a diplomatic coup, Beckstoffer turned around and enlisted Mondavi executive Herb Schmidt, who represents the Napa Valley Vintners Assn. (a winery advocacy organization) as an ally and a registry review committee member.

A simple process

THE process of designating a property as historic vineyard land is simple. Landowners download an application from the Napa Valley Grapegrowers website. The ap-

grounds of St. Helena High School, but 24 acres are owned by the Salvestrin family. Richard Salvestrin's grandparents bought the property just before the repeal of Prohibition. The family sold grapes to local wineries until Richard and his wife, Shannon, built a small winery to produce Salvestrin Estate Cabernet and Sangiovese; they continue to sell Zinfandel grapes from 80-year-old vines to Robert Biale Vineyards, which bottles Old Crane Ranch Zinfandel.

These are just a few of the many possible candidates for the registry. About 18,500 acres of the Napa Valley were in vineyards in the 1890s (nearly half of today's 44,000 acres). So far, says Beckstoffer, "We've been able to find about 10,000 [vineyards] by name, but there are 8,000 acres we can't match [to] the names. We've proved the vineyards existed; now we're trying to tie them to individual parcels."

Using the valley's past to promote its viticultural future seems innocent enough, and yet there's an air of the Trojan horse about this PR project. Intentionally or not, the registry confers something akin to the French *grand cru* status on a few properties.

And although the distinction is based on seniority rather than viticultural merit, the difference will inevitably be blurred; those properties and any grapes they produce will become more valuable over time. Thus the seemingly noncommercial program may be creating a new form of marketing gamesmanship in the wine industry.

During my quarter-century-plus of writing about wine, I've watched the California wine marketing industry become the tail that wags the dog — and I'd bet that sooner or later we'll see some kind of symbol on a wine label indicating a vineyard's historical certification, for competitive advantage if not a higher bottle price.

That subject has come up, says NVG Executive Director Jennifer Kopp. "Would somebody initiate that? Probably, and I don't think we'd necessarily be opposed to it. But it's not part of our strategy. More than anything else, we advocate for agricultural preservation."

plication is reviewed by the 10-member committee of growers and by winery executives, historians, local politicians and a Superior Court judge. The lineages of individual vineyards are being researched by Sharon Aaron of First American Title Co. in Napa.

Aaron said that when California became a state in 1850, the U.S. conveyed previous ownership of property as patents. She traces ownership forward from the patents, using a grantor-grantee index from the Napa County recorder's office.

"You can find out who the buyer purchased it from and who they sold it to. It's a continuous chain," she said. "We try to match up names, find that configuration in a grant deed and try to make it match what the assessor's map looks like today."

One well-known example is the Niebaum-Coppola vineyard in Rutherford. Established as a commercial estate by Finnish sea captain Gustav Niebaum in 1882 on a property where there had been vines since 1871 and cultivated continuously since then, it was the core of Inglenook during its heyday as one of the great California wineries in the 1940s and '50s, and is now owned by film director Francis Coppola. The vines that make up the heart of the modern vineyard are descended directly (by selection and propagation) from Niebaum's original planting, and the Niebaum selection of budwood from the original Cabernet Sauvignon vines has been certified as UC Davis Clone 29.

Another is the Jacob Schram vineyard, now Schramsberg. German immigrant Schram settled in the hills north of St. Helena in the 1880s, building a winery and hiring Chinese pick-and-shovel crews fresh from building the transcontinental railroad to dig wine caves in the slope behind his winery.

Robert Louis Stevenson, visiting Schram in 1880, wrote (in "The Silverado Squatters") that "the stirring sunlight, and the growing vines, and the vats and bottles in the cavern, made a pleasant music for the mind."

A lesser-known historic vineyard is the St. Helena vineyard planted by Dr. George Belden Crane in 1861. Most of Crane's original 100 acres is now the