





A  
Conversation  
with

# Andy Beckstoffer

BY KARI RUEL

Andy Beckstoffer, owner of Beckstoffer Vineyards, the largest independent family-owned vineyard company on California's North Coast, is a man with a vision that has been instrumental in preserving the land of the Napa Valley and elevating the status for the grape growers. He's one of the largest grape growers and continually finds innovative ways to improve the quality of the grape crop. The youthful looking 66-year old is passionate about the Valley he has called home since the 1960's. He and his wife of 45-years have raised five children, including son, David, who is president of the farming company.

Napa Valley Life Magazine's Kari Ruel sat down with Beckstoffer and talked to him about his contribution to this Valley.





NVL: You have led a colorful life and that's exciting. You're considered by many to be a pioneer in the wine business.

Beckstoffer: It has been exciting. The thing is I pinch myself all the time. I came to the Napa Valley in 1969 so there are not many of us veterans left. I guess, I was fortunate enough to come here very young.

NVL: You were on a football scholarship to a school in Virginia. There were not a lot of wineries in Virginia, what influenced you to get into the wine business at such an early age?

Beckstoffer: My MBA was in finance so I got the job back in the 60's to analyze the California wine business for this corporation from a financial point of view. Then I got the job of coming out and negotiating the purchase of these businesses. They had a real hot-shot president of the company then and he asked me to come with him so, all of a sudden I was in California. We found ourselves in a position where we owned wineries, but we didn't have enough grapes so the company asked me to get grapes.

NVL: You fell into the wine business then?

Beckstoffer: I fell into the wine business from a financial point of view, but then came the farming business. I had analyzed myself into the wine business, but in the farming business I found I liked the growers. I liked the earth and working with my hands. Then there was opportunity to buy a farming company for the company I was working for. I asked them to sell me the farming company as entrepreneurial opportunity and do my own thing with people I liked in this place (Napa Valley).

NVL: You're a big advocate of preserving old vineyards and open land. How did that all unfold?

Beckstoffer: To be totally fair about all this, when I first came, I saw the land as an asset to be exploited for business purposes. We would be more efficient in growing grapes. We would bring in the latest technology, but it was an asset like anyone would have an asset in their business. But then over the years, I believed the land besides being a business asset, was a national

treasure that needed to be preserved. The more you are around here, the more you realize that. I don't want anyone to write on my tombstone he made a lot of money. I would love for them to write on my tombstone he was a good steward of the land and he helped preserve it for future generations. We're all just passing through. Whether it's ten, fifteen, twenty-years or beyond; we have a certain passage to hopefully make, where ever you are, better than you found it. That's not making some money off it, that's preserving it when you are dealing with a place like the Napa Valley.

NVL: You're one of the largest landowners in the Napa Valley. How much land have you acquired?

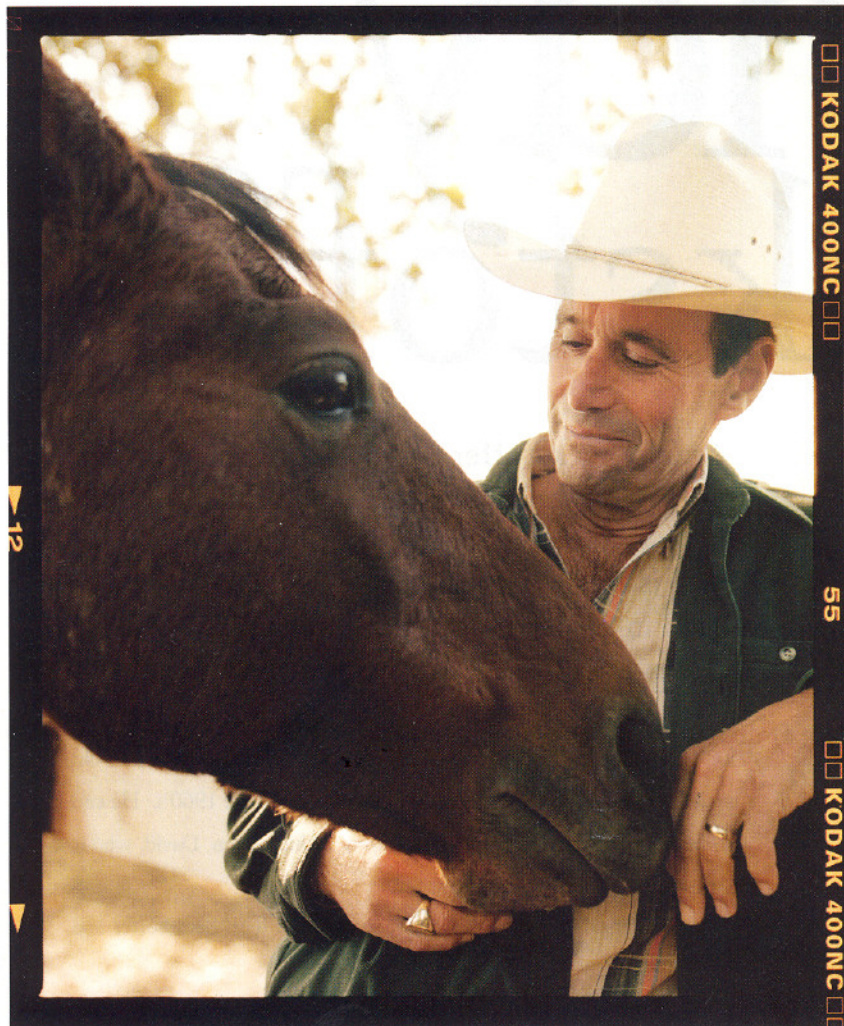
Beckstoffer: We're not the largest, but we're the largest family ownership of land in the County. Then we own property in Lake and Mendocino County as a family not as a corporation. We would be one of the three top land owners.

NVL: How much does that represent in terms of acreage?

Beckstoffer: It's not that big relatively speaking. The average ownership of land is something in the twenty acre range. We own a thousand acres. That sounds big, but how much you own is not the important thing, we own some of the most historic vineyards and I believe, some of the best vineyard land in the Napa Valley, which produces some of the best fruit. To make land valuable, you have to ask; does it produce good fruit and does it have some historical significance?

NVL: What kind of history are you looking for?

Beckstoffer: Go back and look at the property we have that was formerly owned by Dr. George Belden Crane in 1859. Look at the history of the Napa Valley, the two real people who were the founders of the Napa Valley were Crane and Charles Krug; Crane in the vineyards and Krug in the winery. Then you look at Tokalon and Hamilton Crab in 1868 and the piece we're standing on was bought in 1928 and has produced great Cabernets forever. They have the kind of history that we talk about. I'm part of an organization called the historic registry of Napa Valley Vineyards. There were over 18-thousand acres of vineyards planted in Napa County in 1891, but not all land owners were as famous as Crane or Crab. Now I wanted to take modern technology and make it the best for the 21st century where they made it the best for the 19th century.





*NVL: You have now been a part of the Napa Valley for forty plus years and have witnessed a huge shift in the wine environment of the Valley from fourteen wineries in the 1960's to over 300 wineries today. In recent years, we've seen an influx of corporate ownership of former family-owned wineries. How do you perceive that will affect the look and feel of the Napa Valley?*

Beckstoffer: The Napa Valley is so strong. The basic culture, the real soul of the Napa Valley is so long that no big corporations will hurt this Valley for very long and they could very well help it. The heart and soul of the Napa Valley is the people who are here and how they feel about their valley. No zoning ordinance will change that, no political corporation; no corporation will affect what you'll find. If you scratch the surface a little bit, you will find the same Napa Valley that was there and was very agricultural. What's happened around here is its very difficult, some people would say to do business here, build a winery, a vineyard or a restaurant. It's not impossible and only the best succeed so we have the best of the best in terms of vineyards, in terms of wineries, in terms of restaurants and they have found a way to succeed. We had a saying in the 70's, you never let the sun set on the tourist. We let them come taste our wines, but we gave them no place to eat or sleep and we preserved our Valley that way, but that's not the case anymore. The hospitality business, the inns and the restaurants are now equal in quality to our wines. The experience, which is Napa Valley, whether you are a resident or a visitor, is much better today. From the point of view of the vineyards, in the 70's we were farmers, today we're viticulturalists.

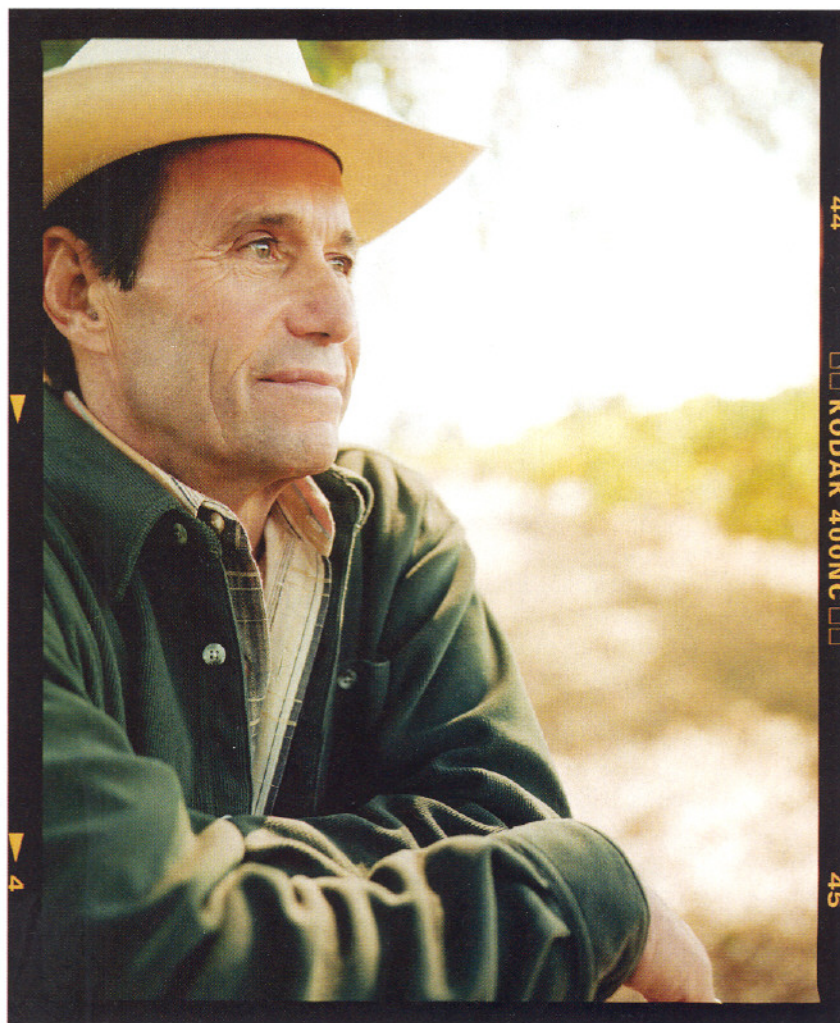
Today, we don't just farm; we understand the technology of this business. Grape growing is a hard business. It takes up to 20-years to see the fruits of our labor, we can't make mistakes. If you grow strawberries and you do something wrong, you can plant a new batch next year and will have fruit that year.

*NVL: You have reputation as the man who knows exactly when to pick the grapes. How did you acquire that? What kind of training did you have or were you self taught?*

Beckstoffer: I am part of team and we have a great professional team that is here that is oriented to the science of viticulture as well as the art of viticulture. If you have been around grapes long enough, you will know when they are ready. You can do all your measurements, but in the end, you have to look and feel what's right and that only comes from experience and paying attention to the details. It takes more

than one set of eyes and one brain. It takes a team all looking at it and communicating with each other. The winemaker also has a lot to say about when to pick the grapes. We have to be the farmer, but we listen to everyone. Some people we pay attention to and some we don't. (Big smile.)

harvest is going to be much tighter and of a better quality. We have had a tight bloom season. So what that says to me now is that the possibility of a truly great quality crop is good. Heat spikes could affect that. The vines look great because of all the water we had last winter. We're into a glorious season.



*NVL: What are you projecting for this year's crop?*

Beckstoffer: This year it's not going to be so large, but at this point (mid summer) there are not many things that tell you what the crop quality is going to be. One of the things to look at is the length of bloom. Grapes are male and female and they have to match, with a bloom time before it sets. If the bloom is stretched out, then the maturity will also be stretched out. So the grapes that bloomed here will be different in maturity than the grapes that bloomed there, but at some point, you pick them all in one particular vineyard. If the bloom time is fairly compacted, the range of quality at

*NVL: What has been your biggest challenge over the years?*

Beckstoffer: The biggest challenge over the years, I think, is to really improve the lot of the grape grower. I mean that from a social, political and economic point of view. The question people ask me over and over again is why I don't start a winery. I don't want a winery. That's not my thing. I am proud to be a grower. In the 1970's, it was clear that the wineries were the first class citizens. The grape growers were second class citizens and the workers were third class. I don't think the farm workers are third class citizens anymore. We understand what they bring to the party. I don't think the



grape growers are second class citizens anymore. We are now listened to. We have a seat at the table and it happened greatly through the Grape Growers Association.

*NVL: You were one of the founding members of the Grape Growers Association and are known as a visionary. Talk about that.*

Beckstoffer: I would say that is one of the things I am proudest of. In 1975, a group of us came together and basically said we are not being paid. We are not being respected. Nobody in the community knew who we were so we needed to form an organization and in those days, the purpose was to raise the social, political and economic status of the grape growers. We needed a seat at the table. Now once you get a seat at the table, you have certain responsibilities to act responsible and we've done that too. I was amazed that people who had a love of wine and who grew grapes didn't know each other. I tend to know everybody. People are the great assets, but if they don't talk to each other, share ideas, what's the deal. Plus, it's a much more fun life if you know people.

By adopting and promoting the technology of growing grapes, bringing us into the 21st century and taking advantage of all that there is, grape growers played a big part in that.

If you ask a grape grower what their most prize possession is they will say their land. If you ask an entrepreneur what his most valuable thing is, he will say people. In that aspect, we are entrepreneurs. We have always treated our people that way. I am distressed that the Upper Valley and the City of Napa have never understood each other better. We need people to people on that and I think to some extent we have made some impact through the Grape Growers Association.

*NVL: What's your vision for the future; first, for your company and second for the Napa Valley?*

Beckstoffer: The vision for the company is to do a better job with what we have rather than to expand; to make our grapes better and to get people to understand the value of the vineyards and how they are being used. If the vineyards are not important, then there is no point in preserving them. It's important to us, the company and to me personally, that vineyards become important and be preserved. The only way to do that is to make them economically sustainable.

Napa Valley, contrary to what people

think about a few corporations coming in, is going to be a Valley of small to medium wineries and small to medium growers. All personally trying to do a better job growing their grapes and making their wines well and promoting themselves. Land values will increase and then level off and then increase. I don't see any real decline in land values.



There is too little of it and too much real value here. I believe most people who work here, if they could afford it, would work for nothing because they love this valley that much. We not only love the Valley, we like it so we want to keep it that way. I have to pinch myself, that here in 2006, 60-miles from San Francisco, we have preserved this Valley. We have preserved it through the dot-commers, though everybody else who wanted to throw money at everything you can think of. I love to travel, but I always love to come home. This Valley is so receiving.

*NVL: We don't want to really talk about age, but you are one of the older grape growers in the Valley. What are you going to do to preserve your vast knowledge? Will there be a book? You have so much to share.*

Beckstoffer: I am just going to talk to you. (Smile) I love to talk to people in their 20's, 30's, and 40's and if I can impart to them one on one and see in the eyes the reaction to what I have to say, that is far more rewarding, then having a book.

*NVL: What is something this Valley doesn't know about you?*

Beckstoffer: I'm into horses. I love my horse and being outside. I have a Morgan

horse and a donkey. I'm into the natural horsemanship or the horse whisper type of style where you deal with love rather than fear.

Marathon running used to be a big love of mine. I'm still into exercise and staying in shape. I broke my leg seven months ago skydiving, but I learned two things from that. It made me more sensitive to everything and less aggressive.

*NVL: More sensitive? Did your horse whisperer philosophy have anything to do with that as well? Relating to animals, how is that similar to relating to the land?*

Beckstoffer: It helps with dealing with the people. Horses respond more than you know to your compassion. They are herd animals so they want to be part of you and you want to be part of the herd just like you want to be part of the people. A horse can be very calm standing by himself and all of a sudden, he gets excited when you come around. It's you, you are the problem, and the horse isn't the problem. So, if you understand that about most people, it's you that is the problem because when they were by themselves, they were okay. Then there is fear. You can make people do things and then you have to stay up all night worrying if they actually did it. But, if you approach people and animals with love, then all of sudden they want to be with you and you don't have to worry if they are going to do it or not.

*NVL: How long have you come from the point of love? Even on your website, it describes you as a shrewd businessman.*

Beckstoffer: I don't think that's exclusive. I believe you can work hard and be shrewd and be successful and also be kind and sensitive. I would hope over the years people would describe me as fair. It's like the people who sold me their land, they sold it cheap, but there was no other buyer. I work hard, but I work smart. I so respect the families around here. I would love for my family to be part of that legacy.

*NVL: How do you want to be remembered?*

Beckstoffer: I was described in Gourmet Magazine's February, 2006 issue and this is what the author said "Andy Beckstoffer has changed the economics of high end viticulture, but his true legacy will be as a steward of the land." I would be proud to be known as a "steward of the land." cw