



THE LONG VIEW

ANDY BECKSTOFFER HAS CHANGED
THE ECONOMICS OF HIGH-END
VITICULTURE, BUT HIS TRUE LEGACY
WILL BE AS A STEWARD OF THE LAND

BY JOHN T. EDGE PHOTOGRAPHS BY CORAL VON ZUMWALT



Beckstoffer's Vineyard Georges III, in Rutherford, was originally planted in 1928.

COCKING HIS HEAD, LEADING WITH HIS RIGHT NOSTRIL, ANDY BECKSTOFFER BURIES HIS AQUILINE NOSE IN A GLASS OF CABERNET SAUVIGNON CRAFTED FROM A SINGLE BLOCK OF HIS VINEYARD GEORGES III, IN THE RUTHERFORD APPELLATION OF CALIFORNIA'S NAPA VALLEY. HIS ANGLE OF APPROACH IS ACUTE, INTENSE, AKIN TO THAT OF A CLEANUP HITTER

leaning into a fastball. Beckstoffer swirls the wine, bobs, swirls. He sips, pulling the blue-black liquid across his tongue, chewing through the tannins, working his satchel of a mouth open and shut.

It's spring in Napa, time to taste last September's harvest. Gathered at a damask-draped table overlooking the barrel room at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Beckstoffer, his son David, and two of the men who manage his company's North Coast vineyards are here to confer with vintner Nicki Pruss, who buys grapes from Beckstoffer for the Stag's Leap Artemis, a Cabernet and Merlot blend that retails for around \$50.

Arranged in a semicircle are wineglasses filled with samples, and stacks of spreadsheets delineating sugar content, acidity level, berry weight, and other measures of the crush's merit. When the 66-year-old Beckstoffer, arguably the most important grape grower in America, speaks, all eyes cant his way. "What do you think of the D block?" he asks in the manner of a salesman come face-to-face with a make-or-break account. "I like what you're doing with my grapes, but I want to know what you think."

On first encounter, say, at a cocktail party, the Virginia-born Beckstoffer may tell you, in a tone suited to such a gathering, that he's a farmer. He comes by that moniker honestly: Beckstoffer owns, cultivates, and harvests more than 3,000 acres of vineyards north of San Francisco, in Napa, Mendocino, and Lake counties. But his approach to agriculture is not rooted in the gentleman-farmer tradition. Beckstoffer's methods reflect the high stakes of wresting from prime Napa Valley farmland a yield of sufficient quality and tonnage that, depending on site and provenance, can bring more than \$200,000 an acre. Like an agriwonk touting a silicon chip-enabled Jeffersonian ideal, Beckstoffer espouses sensor-controlled drip irrigation and GPS-directed microtractors fitted with weed triggers and herbicide guns as keys to keeping greenspaces in agricultural production. And, like the business school graduate he is (Dartmouth, 1966), he believes in the transformative potential of innovation and measures success by hard-dollar determinates like return on capital.

Get to know Beckstoffer a bit better and he'll drop the farmer façade and tell you that, no matter the jeans and tattersall shirt uniform, no matter the mud that cakes his boots, no matter the zeal with which he promotes agricultural preserves and conservation easements, he is more entrepreneur than agronomist. "Nothing to hide here," he says. "Might as well be honest; I'm a businessman."

Beckstoffer has not always focused solely on grape growing. "I made wine for a short while," he says, as he pilots his red Mercedes SUV north from Stag's Leap along the Silverado Trail to the next grape-growing frontier, Lake County, where, amid a landscape pocked with junked cars and house trailers, he recently planted some 1,000 acres of Cabernet vines. "That was back in the late 1980s, but it didn't work out. I knew pretty early on that making wine is not a logical extension of growing grapes. I mean, is baking bread a logical

extension of raising wheat? And I realized that I didn't like the wine-dinner thing, the people beckoning from across the room, asking me to sign their bottles. Better for me to do what I know—to raise the best grapes and work with winemakers who believe that their wines should express the land on which the grapes were grown."

As Beckstoffer motors up and over the ridges of Mount St. Helena, carving the hairpins, charging hard across the scarps, he warms to his pitch. "I can remember a time when winemakers said they alone were the ones who gave the wines their structure, their biceps and triceps," he says. "Those were the days of what I call the 'magic chef' in the winery, working with grapes and oak barrels, making his magic potions and coming up with wonderful vintages. I'm glad to say those days are just about gone. Grape growers are no longer second-class citizens. We're now closer to being partners in the making of great wines—social and intellectual and financial equals. A great change has come."

Beckstoffer has been a catalyst for change in Napa Valley. Some would say the primary catalyst. He arrived in the late 1960s, in search of acquisitions for Heublein Corporation, a conglomerate whose claims to fame were the manufacture of Smirnoff vodka and A. I. sauce. At Beckstoffer's urging, Heublein bought two of the most prestigious wineries of the day, Inglenook and Beaulieu Vineyards, and set in motion a series of events that, by way of a leveraged buyout and legerdemain, landed Beckstoffer in control of an independent farm company that grew premium grapes for California winemakers. Along the way, he brokered a boycott settlement with the United Farm Workers union and, as a memento, walked away with a bottle of Inglenook Chardonnay signed by César Chávez.

But life in Napa was not altogether simpatico. Owing to his brash style and corporate imprimatur, Beckstoffer was seen by some as one of the barbarians massing at the gates of an enological paradise. "Those were the days when I saw land as an asset to be exploited," he says, recognizing the hubris that animated his early career. "Now I understand that land is a natural resource to be preserved."

In that recognition, in that psychological transformation, one can trace the arc of Andy Beckstoffer's career—and the fate of North Coast agriculture. Like many Napa Valley arrivistes of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Beckstoffer converted to the gospel of land preservation with the fervor of a sinner struck down by a bolt of lightning.

While serving on the Napa County Planning Commission, he worked to increase the minimum parcel size for lands within the agricultural preserve to 40 acres. While president of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers, he proposed and successfully defended a directive that wineries doing business within that same agricultural preserve must use at least three quarters Napa Valley grapes. Meanwhile, Beckstoffer was compiling a real-estate portfolio of the best vineyard land in California—and pondering the benefits of enlightened self-interest.

"I've learned that sustainability requires more than environmental sensitivity," says Beckstoffer, seated at a redwood

picnic table with a view of the rumpled carpet of Cabernet vines that roll through this new Red Hills appellation. "To keep land in agriculture, you must produce a rate of return that keeps developers at bay."

Since the mid-1980s, Beckstoffer has been obsessed with this idea, advancing numerous strategies to ensure that he and his fellow winegrowers will thrive, even as land prices skyrocket and climatic vacillations take their toll. With an eye toward future profits, Beckstoffer bought undervalued land, the most striking example of which is his conversion of a decommissioned mental institution in upstate Mendocino to the growing of grapes. But he has found his *métier* in selling winemakers and consumers on the value of prime real estate like To Kalon Vineyard, in cultivation since the 1860s and one of the most storied plots in the Napa Valley. Using the land as his basis, Beckstoffer has built his own brand. Winemakers and in-the-know consumers have come to expect that a bottle crafted from Beckstoffer-cropped grapes and blazoned with "Beckstoffer Vineyards" will earn 90-something scores from übercritic Robert Parker.

"The goal is to reinforce the idea of Napa as the brand," Beckstoffer says. "That's the rationale behind vineyard designation, to teach consumers about the land that gave birth to their wine." It's also what motivates the Registry of Historic Napa Valley Vineyards—another Beckstoffer-led initiative, best understood as an accounting of properties first planted in grapes more than a century past. "Soon," he says, "everyone will know that the history of Napa Valley winemaking extends back to the 1880s, not the 1970s."

As any good businessperson knows, first you establish value; then you set a price. With value established, Beckstoffer has, of late, focused his attention on a coup de théâtre of two complementary pricing strategies. Like strong medicine, they don't go down easy, but Beckstoffer is convinced they are the key to the survival of North Coast agriculture.

The first, an idea Beckstoffer has been flogging since the late 1970s, is the bottle-price formula. The principle is that

the value of the grapes should reflect the value of the bottle of wine in which they end up—not last year's commodity price. "It's based on a series of historical calculations," says Beckstoffer. "But it works out to a grape price per ton of a hundred times the retail price of a single bottle."

Among the converts to Beckstoffer's way of thinking is Paul Hobbs, whose recently released 2002 Cabernet made from Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard grapes fetches more than \$250 per bottle. "When I pay that kind of price, I get a grower who is intensely committed to my success," says Hobbs, reached by cellphone while stalking another Napa Valley vineyard. "The grower becomes my partner. And that's just what I want," says the man who, on the basis of Beckstoffer's formula, faced down a \$25,000 per ton grape bill in a market where \$4,000 per ton is the average.

Hobbs has not wholly embraced the second prong of Beckstoffer's pricing model, a percentage bonus paid to growers who, at the behest of winemakers in search of elevated sugar levels, more intense taste, and higher scores from critics, take the risk of leaving grapes on the vine until they begin to dehydrate. "I'm not fond of all of Andy's ideas," says Hobbs. "And I told him as much. So we figured out another way to share the burden of risk. But we will share it; we're partners, both of us deeply invested in making great wine."

Truth be told, Beckstoffer knows what Nicki Pruss of Stag's Leap thinks of his grapes. He always has. And now he knows what Paul Hobbs thinks, too. Such stature, especially in the eyes of Hobbs, one of the most celebrated winemakers in the world, is a good measure of a life's work in the vineyards.

But Beckstoffer says this will not be his legacy. Nor will the bottle-price formula. "I believe in this place, in much the same way that I believe in the land itself," he says, his hand wrapped around a glass of 2002 Double Diamond Beckstoffer Amber Knolls Vineyard, made from Cabernet Sauvignon grapes grown here in (Continued on page 135)

Steve Test (below, at right), winemaker at Merryvale Vineyards, buys Vineyard Georges III Cabernet Sauvignon from Andy Beckstoffer.



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Lake County. As is his habit, Beckstoffer leans into the glass, right nostril first, his body tensing with the effort. His eyes fix upon the horizon. Forty five miles south, in Napa Valley proper, lies the hallowed ground of To Kalon Vineyard. In the foreground, Amber Knolls Vineyard unspools before him.

“What has America contributed to the world?” he asks, reveling in the role of elder statesman, his voice tinged with bravado. “Jazz, maybe movies. That’s about it. If we could make the finest wine in the world, that would be good. Maybe you could sleep on that.”