

After Mondavi, is Andy Beckstoffer Napa Valley's new main man?



John Lindblom photo

Grape grower Andy Beckstoffer

By John Lindblom
STAFF WRITER

Andy Beckstoffer has an excellent sense of "place." For the diverse varieties of grapes grown on the more than 1,000 acres of vineyards under his ownership, to be sure. But also of his own place in the mosaic of the wine industry.

Absent any form of bluster, the gentleman-farmer from Virginia assumes his well-established place among the most important growers in the Western Hemisphere. Something else, though ... Beckstoffer seems to give quiet acceptance to the proposition that, with the passing of Robert Mondavi in May, he is heir to becoming the premier, numero uno, most iconic individual in the nation's wine-production capital.

The idea is beginning to take hold in the minds of others as well. "Who else?" asks one grower.

Beckstoffer is not likely to proclaim himself the successor to Mondavi, though. You don't simply replace a legend who reinvented American wine and campaigned until he had positioned the Napa Valley product alongside the greatest wines in the world.

All that aside, Beckstoffer's response to the question of who will be the Valley's leader now

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that Mondavi is gone, gives vital insight into his thought process. It is a veritable self-portrait.

"We lost Bob Mondavi, but if you go back to the 1970s the Napa Valley icon — the guy who was best known — was Andre Tchelistcheff, who was a production man. He was the magic chef who made the difference in making great wine," Beckstoffer asserted. "In the '80s, the focus dramatically changed from production to marketing — Mondavi, who was talking about the Napa brand. It was the brand-orientation era, if you will.

"There is not going to be another Bob Mondavi and there's not going to be another Tchelistcheff," Andy continued. "There are 400 wineries here now — when Bob started there was like 30 — and it (the Napa Valley wine industry) has gotten to be too many and too diffused, and the world is now too complicated.

"Now I think most people would say that the thing you really need to make great wines is the vineyards, so the new icon here is the vineyards." Certainly there are differences between the two

men, but will Andy Beckstoffer replace Mondavi? Has he already? To more than one of the Valley's growers, the concept of Beckstoffer's ascension strikes a "why not?" chord, while others, though Beckstoffer admirers, are more reticent. Here's what they a few of them had to say.

Bruce Phillips, president of Napa Valley Grape Growers: "Andy certainly has the perspective of where this valley has come from and what its potential is going to be. He shares that with his predecessor, Mondavi, although Andy has a different perspective on the industry. Mondavi certainly led with the promise of the Napa Valley Appellation making fine wines that are recognized the world over and then followed with the wines being made from that appellation. But you have to start with raw ingredients ... and those are grapes."

Tom Renaldi, Provenance Vineyards: "Andy is on a different level. He is the biggest promoter I know for Rutherford certainly and for his vineyards. The Napa Valley itself? In the world today that's big, big shoes. I really respect and admire Andy. I've had a long good relationship with him.

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Beckstoffer

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I think he's done me much more good than I could have hoped, but Mondavi was a world figure and a pioneer. A legend! Boy, I hope Andy's up to that. He is somebody I would not have immediately pictured, but maybe it's because I'm too close to the whole thing. Then you have to kind of scratch your head and say "Who else?"

Randy Snowden, Napa Valley Grapegrowers: "The answer, I think, is yes. The fact is he already is and has been for some time, because he is connected to the heart and soil that make up this valley. Andy has been a leading spokesperson since I can remember. Robert Mondavi was a colorful and gifted man, but there was room for other basic leaders in the valley. And Andy's one of them — if you are talking about a proponent for what we call terroir, which you need to bring grapes to market that represent the Napa Valley — and then tying that to the importance of preserving the Valley agriculture, as opposed to (the Mondavi-fostered) powerful wine brands. In my book Andy always has been the leader and the most influential voice out there."

Ron Wicker, vineyard manager: "Boy, that's a tough question. Andy certainly played a significant role in developing

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Beckstoffer's new paradigm Grapegrower brings 25 years of changes to vineyards

By John Lindblom
STAFF WRITER

It's hard to imagine where the Valley's wine industry would be today without Andy Beckstoffer.

Consider this: In 1970 — the year he came here — an acre of Napa Valley land could be bought for \$4,000. Today, that same acre would cost between \$150,000 and a quarter-million dollars. And, need we add, going up all the time.

By bringing a new paradigm to the vineyard, Beckstoffer has had a lot to do with this astronomical spike in land value. As much, perhaps, as Robert Mondavi had in elevating the prestige of Napa Valley wines.

"It's gone crazy," Andy acknowledges. "What's happened is that the value of land is beginning to reflect the price of the wine, which, in turn, is reflected in the price of the grapes. As the price of wine continues to go up, the price of grapes and the price of land will continue to go up."

The Valley's premier wines are priced at \$200 to \$300 a bottle presently, but Beckstoffer doesn't discount the possibility that the prices may one day approach the \$600 to \$700 bottle price of European wines.

"A (price) saturation point? I don't know," he said. As one of the world's most important growers, Beckstoffer's 10 vineyards occupy more than 1,000 acres of the finest grape-growing soil in Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties. Among his holdings are some of the most historic vineyards, most notably the 550-acre To Kalon, an area, it is claimed, that produces the best Bordeaux varietal wine grapes in California and maybe the world.

It's fair to say that the changes wrought in the Valley over the last quarter-century are largely attributable to what the man from Virginia brought to the table.

"When we came to the Napa Valley, there were, as I recall, only two trained professional viticulturists," Beckstoffer said. "Growers here were farmers then, not trained viticulturists. We brought four. My personal background was as an engineer. What we wanted to do was experiment and look at new things."

Those "new things" included items such as:

- Drip irrigation technology from Israel, which became the bedrock of the Carneros Appellation — one of the few viticultural districts whose wines display a proven and distinct style.

Beckstoffer: "We put it in the vineyards in Carneros in 1971. If it hadn't been for irrigation you could never have developed Carneros."

- More efficient vine spacing than the 8-foot by 12-foot between the vines and the rows that was standard 25 years ago.

Spacing then was based on the amount of water available. Learning that the spacing was established by Dr. Albert J. Winkler, the man generally regarded as the father of California viticulture, Beckstoffer conferred with him at the Oakville (UC Davis) test station. He had to convince Winkler he could develop the additional vines and secure the necessary equipment for closer spacing. Then, recalled Beckstoffer, Winkler said, "I think you ought to try it."

- Bench grafting.

Beckstoffer: "It used to be that when you planted a vineyard you put a rootstock in and in the mud and the rain you budded it. Some people started doing benchgrafting in the nursery on a bench. With field budding you might get a 60 percent take; with bench grafting you might get 95 percent."

The hand that Beckstoffer has had in shaping the Napa Valley wine industry goes far beyond new technology.

As a founder of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers, he led the movement to protect and preserve agriculture and grape-growing as a viable business for all of Northern California. His main purpose, he said, has been to "increase the economic, political and social status of the grape-grower ... to make him a first-class citizen.

"In doing that I think the whole Valley is stronger because you have strength in numbers and we all work together," he said.

"From 1971 to 1981 we had a contract with the United Farm Workers and lots of people said 'fight those people — they're union people,' and we said 'No, they're our people who are represented by a union and the status of a farmworker is something that we need to consider.'"

He is satisfied that growers and vintners are now on a "pretty much even basis." But he added, "Some people have fought the farmworkers and continue to fight the farmworkers — and you know who they are. But most of us have adopted them as our people, who are very important to the operations and the quality of the wine."

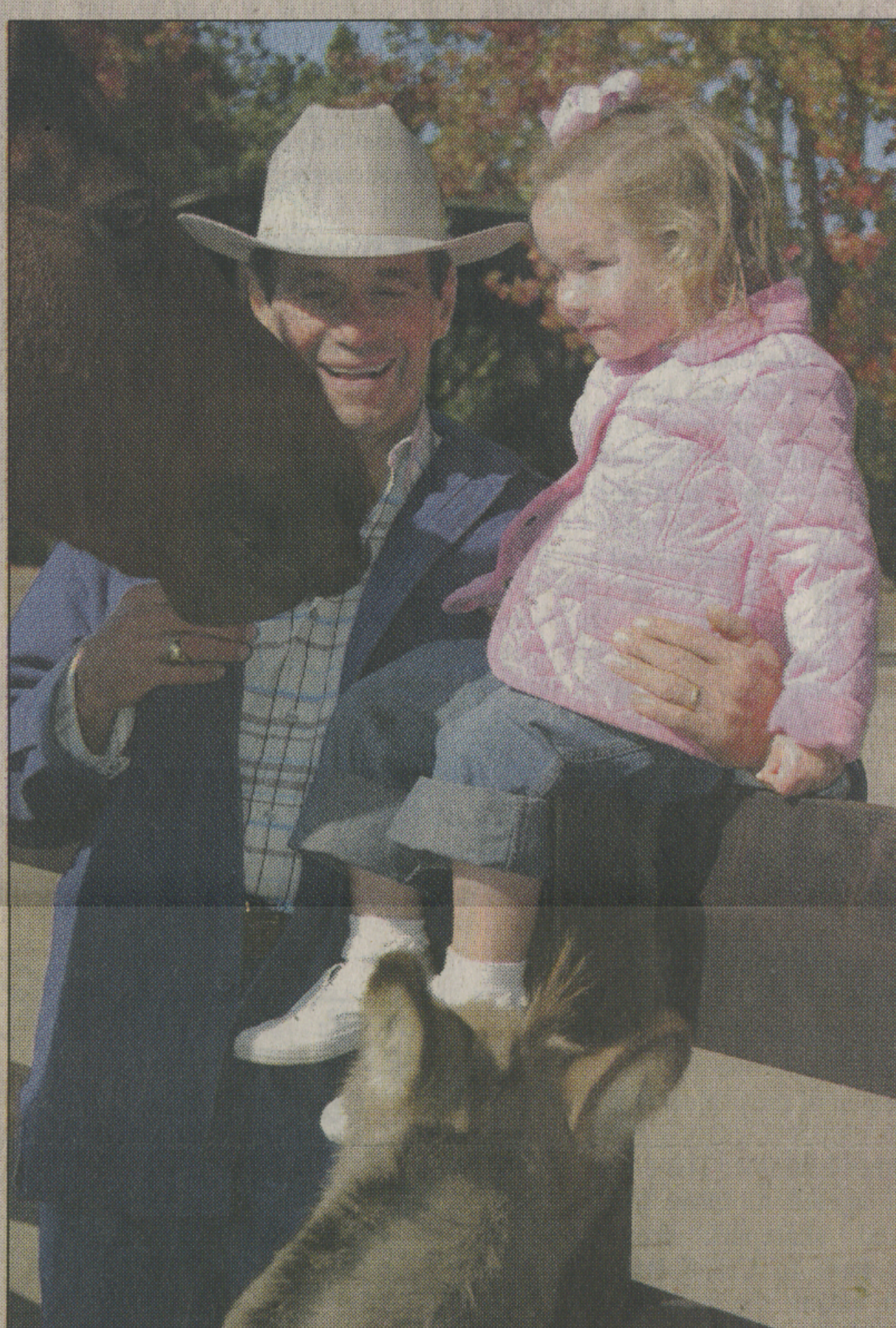
Beckstoffer also took a lead role in resolving long-time disagreements between growers and wineries. At issue was the extended period at harvest when the grapes are mature but beginning to lose sugar that converts to high alcohol versus less tannin and a loss of revenues for growers.

"This is a conversation that has been going on around here for a considerable amount of time — from 2000 on," he said. As Beckstoffer sees it, the task was to get the argument "out of the shop into the open and (in) professional conversations."

His means was a series of seminars bringing both sides together with international experts such as Richard Smart, and UC Davis scientists.

Although conventional belief was that the seminar "was going to be a

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John Lindblom photo

Ellie Beckstoffer comes face-to-face with Beau, a Morgan horse who resides on her grandfather Andy Beckstoffer's farm. At the lower part of the picture, Alfalfa, the donkey, awaits his introduction.

Got questions? Ask Andy

By John Lindblom
STAFF WRITER

In the course of an interview, the range of topics that Andy Beckstoffer can cover is unlimited. Witness the following:

- The shifting of the center of the wine region from the Napa Valley to Mendocino County because of global warming.

"That's just a lot of conversation. You have to look at it on a global basis. The state of California is too small a region to consider that some of it will have climate changes.

"If you talk about the effects on us here, as it gets generally warmer you're going to get more fog coming in, which makes the Napa Valley cooler. The temperature goes up, but it's night-time temperatures. Higher temperature at night does some good in terms of flavor development.

"The Vintners Association is now doing some serious surveying to accumulate data as to what's happening in climate change. Anything else is just pure speculation. Who knows? But the idea of the center changing from Napa to Mendocino is baloney."

- The diminished economy's effect on the Valley.

"Most of the vineyards here are pretty well protected, not just the wineries. But with the weak dollar our workers are going to have trouble getting credit. The people who work for me and the people who live here have all got to be affected by this. We don't have any problems borrowing the money we need; were in pretty good shape. But many people in the Valley are very much affected. Plus, with the weak dollar, you have Europeans coming in with very cheap dollars. So, just like you've seen elsewhere, you can expect that there's going to be more Europeans buying property here."

- The differences in wine made from grapes grown in high vs. low elevations.

"In the Napa Valley you're farming at about 100 feet above sea level. On Mt. Veeder and in Lake County we are farming about 2,000 feet. When you get to that height the barometric pressures

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Ask Andy

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are different. In Lake County you don't have the fog, so you get longer days and also Lake County doesn't get the heat spikes that we do here. You have some very definite climatic situations at different elevations that you do not have on the Valley floor. It affects grape quality, but you don't want to say that one is a good quality and one is a bad quality — it's just a different grape."

- The future for biodynamic growing in the United States.

"I'm not into it, but I think biodynamics is the right direction. We should be looking at more environmentally sensitive and more natural ways of growing. We, ourselves, are becoming more environmentally sensitive all the time, using more natural fertilizers and pesticides. We've been doing that for a long time in Mendocino County with organic vineyards and we're converting all of our Lake County operations to organics. The difference between organic and not organic is probably just one chemical: Round-Up."

- Why, despite the fact that he produces some of the best grapes, he elects to supply wineries — 50 of them at the moment — but not add winemaking to his operations.

working toward getting wines that are full-flavored with less alcohol. What you're going to see, I think, is winemakers will get more restrained and elegant wines and hopefully get the alcoholic content down."

Beckstoffer speaks positively of how the Valley has developed in his nearly four decades here.

"You've got 400 wineries here. When I came here there were six big ones," he said. "They understand about the quality,

"Some people's goal is to create a great wine, but we've always been oriented to being good stewards of the land. I like farming, I like being around the land. The winery business from the point of view of management is not a logical extension of growing grapes. We buy vineyards as a real estate business and a financing business. We don't manufacture anything and were not interested in the marketing business. It's a totally different thing.

"Like I've said so often, just because you can grow wheat doesn't mean you can sell cereal. When they write my obituary or whatever the hell it is, we want to be seen as stewards of the land, not selling the best wine. We want to leave this place less at risk for future generations than we found it."

they understand about marketing and you've got strong organizations now — the Grape Growers Association and, hopefully, the (Napa Valley) Land Trust ... People don't realize there is more land under conservation than there is in the vineyards (10 percent versus 9 percent).

"So, one of real hallmarks of this place is conservation and there are really strong organizations to make that happen, which you didn't have years ago. I feel very good about the Napa Valley."

Beckstoffer

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fight," Andy recalled, instead it led to grower-winery agreement that solutions needed to be worked out mutually for a common problem.

"Nobody has the answer yet," said Beckstoffer, "but I think everybody is