

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 hang-time disagreements between growers and wineries. At issue was the extended period at harvest when the grapes are mature but beginning to gain sugar that converts to high alcohol versus less tonnage 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 coffee shops 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



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.

Beckstoffer

FROM PAGE B1

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 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, 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."