

# Napa Valley's Beckstoffer a pioneer in grape industry

By PAUL WAGNER

**W**HEN talking to Andy Beckstoffer about wine, people are torn between wanting to hear his stories about the past and wanting to pry into where we are going in the future. Either way, the conversation is both fun and educational.

## Industry changes

The wine industry was different 30 years ago when Beckstoffer first served as president of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers. Napa Valley cabernets sold for \$10 to \$15, and grape growers were perceived as farmers.

"As growers, we were seen as mere suppliers," says Beckstoffer, "and we were selling grapes based on sugar levels and tonnage, not quality." It was a situation he was determined to change.

At the time, 1976, there was a controversy about the labeling laws that allowed wineries from Napa Valley to source 49% of their fruit elsewhere. Only 51% of the fruit was required to come from the region on the label. Consumers, and Beckstoffer, wanted to raise that ratio to 75%.

"We supported wine consumers in their battle," says Beckstoffer. "In the end we won. It was important for the wine industry because it drew a line in the sand — a commitment to quality and integrity. It made a mark on the international market for Napa Valley."

Today most experts say great wine is made in the vineyard more than in the winery. Thus top wineries are very protective of their fruit source.

"Winemakers share a lot of information about how they make wine," says Beckstoffer, "but they don't like sharing their grapes. When they get a top-notch vineyard, they don't want grapes going to competitors."

## Voice of an expert

Beckstoffer speaks from experience. In a recent *Wine Spectator* review of California cabernets, 10 of the top 25 wines came from Andy Beckstoffer-grown grapes.

## Key Points

- Andy Beckstoffer, Napa Valley, is influential in wine industry.
- He's helped change the perception of grape growers.
- Beckstoffer wants growers to be paid by the wine bottle price.

"This hasn't happened overnight," he says. "It's been 35 years in the making, and we're a long way from done."

"In 1971 we brought drip irrigation to Napa Valley, he continues. "We are still looking for ways to grow better grapes: Closer vine spacing, overhead frost protection, new trellis systems, benchgrafts are part of growing great grapes."

But more than quality fruit is required, says Beckstoffer. "We started farming some vineyards organically in the 1980s," he says. "We are careful to be environmentally sensitive. It's who we are and how we do business."

## More than a supplier

Beckstoffer also wants grape growers to be paid on the wine bottle price.

"If I grow the best grapes in the world, and they go to a winemaker who is making a wine that sells for \$250 a bottle, then I am more than just a supplier," says Beckstoffer. "I am a partner. I'll give him the very best I can grow. But I will also share in his success. That's a key part of partnership!"

Another investment is the land. "We bought historic vineyards in the Napa Valley when others were losing faith," says Beckstoffer. "It was during the 1990s phylloxera outbreak. Of the 10 vineyards we own, we bought six, including To-Kalon, from wineries who wouldn't invest. We spent to replant with modern methods, rootstocks, trellises, clones ... we rebuilt vineyards with one thing in mind: growing world-class fruit."

It's a different way of grape marketing. Instead of selling to corporate wineries that blend grapes for a mass market, Beckstoffer has taken an opposite approach.

"We look for winemakers who want to make great wine," he says. Today more than 50 winemakers buy fruit from those vineyards, and the number is growing.

"When I hear from a winemaker who wants to make a great signature wine, I will find time to talk. We want to work with people like that. That's the future for our kind of agriculture," Beckstoffer says.

## The future

"We led seminars in 2004 and 2005 to focus on the issue of high-alcoholic wines," Beckstoffer notes. "We are still working to find a solution. I think consumers and sommeliers are worried about alcohol levels. Most argue that if we lowered

alcohol and maintained flavor, that is the right direction.

"We have a beautiful place here in the Napa Valley," he adds. "If we can't make farming a legitimate, profitable business here, then we'll succumb to the need for housing. We fought for the Napa ag preserve, and we're fighting now for conservation easements. But the real battle is to make this business work for the grape grower."

*Wagner is a Napa writer.*



**GRAPE GROWER TRIBUTE:** Andy Beckstoffer, Napa Valley grape grower, is a pioneer in changing how growers are seen by the wine industry. "Grape growers were often perceived as mere farmers, providing the raw materials for winemakers," he says. Beckstoffer operates nine vineyards totaling more than 1,000 acres in Napa, plus vineyards in Mendocino and Lake County.