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Grace Meets Grit

Andy Beckstoffer's Passion is Dust.

By Maile Field, *North Coast Correspondent*

The southern gentleman of Napa Valley, Andy Beckstoffer, has brought not only the charm, politeness and plantation-owner aristocracy of his native Virginia to California, he has done it with remarkable savoir-faire, grace – and grit.

An engineer with a master's degree in business, the man who has broken the mold by acquiring thousands of acres of prime vineyard property without actually getting into the wine business, is a ruddy-cheeked athlete of German stock. Today, you can not have a conversation about California Cabernet without the mention of his name.

Andy Beckstoffer in his Napa vineyard.

Possibly the source of that "grit" is "Papa Beck," who rode the boat over only a century ago to the German colony where the Beckstoffer family then built a lumber and millwork business in the Richmond, Virginia area. Andy, whose eloquence retains the charm of a Virginia accent, moved to California some 60 years later where he has likewise begun what can only be called another colony; he has five children and five grandchildren.

Beckstoffer views himself lucky to have his son as president of his company. With this exception, he keeps his family on the "pleasure" side of the work ratio. On family and work Beckstoffer's comment is "For rich, or for poorer, but not for both."

The second of eight children, Andy Beckstoffer said he had a "great" childhood. He attended a military high school before landing a football scholarship to Virginia Polytechnic Institute. A stint in the army was followed by a return to school, this time to Dartmouth for an M.B.A.

A four-time marathon runner, Beckstoffer still enjoys hiking all over

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the world.

He also keeps himself busy winning awards like the "citizen of the year," which was bestowed on him and his wife, Betty in 2019 by the St. Helena Chamber of Commerce for their dedication and active participation in the community. In 2005 Andy was awarded the Grower of the Year award by CGPA. In the Napa Valley, the Beckstoffer name is perhaps most closely associated with the Rutherford Dust Society, a group he founded and presides over that promotes Rutherford terroir. In May of 2006, the Napa Grapegrowers Association awarded its first Grower of the Year Award to Andy, according to Beckstoffer's website bio. In 2007 the Napa County Farm Bureau acknowledged Andy as Agriculturist of the Year, and that same year he also received the first ever U.S. Congressional Wine Caucus Commendation, his site also states.

Fred Schrader called Beckstoffer a "visionary" who is "very focused on producing the best quality grapes that is possible." The Schrader Cellars honoree, a former nonirrigated walnut orchard struggled, travelers on highway 29 through Lake County have watched the Beckstoffer blanket spread to more than 600 acres. Plans are for 1000 acres in Lake County alone to be transitioned for organic certification.

minary explained that his 10-year-old partnership with Beckstoffer –wherein Beckstoffer grows the grapes and Schrader makes the wine—is the best of all possible worlds. He pointed to the double century marks the Tokalon-sourced wines won, with three others trailing at 98, 98 and 99 respectively in the 2006 vintage, as a new achievement for California. "This is the result that Andy and I get by working together," he said.

Beckstoffer's career began at Heublein Inc., a company that was in Beckstoffer's words "into buying companies." He arranged the purchase of United Vintners' Italian Swiss Colonies, owned by the cooperative of grape growers at the time –the late '60s. Beckstoffer said he was 29 years old when he started the vineyard business for Heublein. He then convinced his employer to sell the vineyards to him. He leveraged the purchase, according to his company's literature, with the $7,500 he was worth at the time.

"I was 33 when I bought it," he said, "and I'm 37 now."

Beckstoffer's joke is not lost on any Napa, Mendocino or Lake County grower or real estate professional. The "B" has come a long way in the intervening years; he will be 70 years old in 2009. His name is on 3,500 acres of ultra premium winegrape acreage in three counties and there's no sign he's letting up.

With 600 acres –strong in the red hills overlooking Clear Lake, the Beckstoffer machine is scheduled to carve another 400 acres out of Lake County wilderness in the next three years, all of it destined for organic certification.

The age-wise philosophy behind the accomplishments of the man runs to the quirky without losing the solidity of the pragmatic farmer.

For Beckstoffer, the business of growing grapes is about land stewardship, which he defines as "leaving it at no risk of urbanization" and "in better condition for future farming than you found it."

Speaking of the future during the worst economic times in recent history, Beckstoffer's prophecy is optimistic, albeit painted with a broad brush: "The whole world is going to be brighter and

At a rate of 100 new vineyard acres a year, Beckstoffer's Lake County vineyard manager Randy Krug has his work cut out for him.

have more fun."

Likewise unique is Beckstoffer's self-perception. Beckstoffer said he feels his greatest accomplishments are not land acquisition but raising the economic, social and political status of the grape grower. He also lists "raising the consciousness of the importance of the vineyard" in the winemaking process. But that is all he lists.

He is also quick – and brief – when asked what his mistakes have been. "I should have bought more land," he said.

On the serious side of the question, Beckstoffer said every time his business has had trouble, it was because of communication breakdown or because someone didn't pay attention to detail.

As Beckstoffer's legacy is clearly turning 'farmers' into 'viticulturists,' so his list of wines, which top out by tickling Wine Spectator's century mark, have proved his dust to must philosophy. By inventing the formula of basing his price of grapes on the price of the bottle, he has led winemakers into the vineyard, where, he implied, the wine is actually made.

Beckstoffer claims he is not in the winery business. But he is in the winemaking business.

The industry-known (but hardly embraced) Beckstoffer grape value formula provides a minimum per-acre price for the grapes but ties the price per bottle to the price the grower receives per ton by a factor of 100. For example, if Beckstoffer has a three-acre block and the winery wants just 10 tons out of it to produce a bottle of wine that retails for $130, Beckstoffer will receive $13,000 per ton for whatever the block produces, or $39,000 per acre (his contracted minimum,) whichever is higher.

The incentives that are created balance the needs of the grower with the ambition of the winery.

Why is Beckstoffer not in the winery business? Another salient answer: it is not logical; it takes a whole different skillset to market and sell wine.

Beckstoffer later concedes, "there is a lot of stuff I don't want you to know."

But among the things Beckstoffer does want growers to know, is that they should not sacrifice quality for tonnage. "You can't lose money in the vineyard and make it up in the winery," he said.

Likewise unexpected, his reasons for environmental consciousness derive from a respect for the worker. "If you

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want to keep workers happy, you have to be environmentally sensitive," he said.

Winegrowing, Beckstoffer efficiently elucidates, "is a very complicated business."

Beckstoffer has been a key proponent of many of vineyard technological innovations over the years. His public relations literature credits him with no less than bringing drip irrigation to Napa Valley. Who would doubt it?

"You don't just go out and prune," he said. "You use the natural qualities of the terroir . . . air, light and sun."

You prune it for quality, he goes on, "you don't leave fruit and go back later and fine tune it."

Andy Beckstoffer's Lake County vineyard manager Randy Krug points out the 300 acres Beckstoffer plans to develop into vineyards on the south Bank of Mount Konocti.

Beckstoffer also emphasizes use of the right rootstock, as an ongoing concern, as well as careful attention to the timing and quantity of irrigation.

Beyond vine manipulation admonitions, with which most growers are familiar, Beckstoffer does not stop.

Beckstoffer is credited with founding the Napa Valley Grapegrowers (he was also 2nd president and a long-time Board member.) Through this organization Andy has led the movement to protect and preserve agriculture and grape growing as a viable business in Northern California..

In 1976 Beckstoffer, as president of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers, joined with wine consumers to get the varietal and appellation content changed from 51% to 75%, thus improving the reliability and consistency of American wines.

Coming from a grower, it may seem like a strange complaint. But Beckenstoffer believes today issue is that the alcohol content of wine is too high, so that the wine competes with the food. He traces this to the chemical composition of the grape, it's pH and sugar content, which are the responsibility of the grower.

What is the job of the Chief Executive Officer of a vineyard company? "Innovate and motivate," he said simply.

On a personal plane, Beckstoffer said his ambition is driven by lifestyle. "I love the land," he said point blank.

With the grace of the gentleman farmer he added, "There is no reason in God's world to drink bad wine or deal with people you don't like."

Beckstoffer's vineyards reflect a respect for aesthetics and land stewardship.