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The Most Powerful Grower in Napa

By LETTIE TEAGUE



Erin Kunkel for the Wall Street Journal

GENTLEMAN FARMER | Andy Beckstoffer sells grapes to some of Napa's top names.

The Napa Valley has been a little short on legends lately. Not legendary wines—there are still plenty of those—but legendary figures. It's almost three years since the last legendary man, Robert Mondavi, passed away and much longer since he was the one man most synonymous

with this great California wine region.

According to Napa grape grower Andy Beckstoffer, the time of legendary men may be over. "The vineyards are the next Robert Mondavi. The vineyards are what matters," he said.

One could argue that this position was either born of great knowledge or was rather self-serving, since Mr. Beckstoffer owns 1,000 acres of vineyard land in Napa.

Unlike many growers, Mr. Beckstoffer only sells grapes to other wineries; he doesn't make wine himself. "That's an entirely different business," he said. It simplifies matters and reduces expenses and also answers

the inevitable question about growers who also make wine from their grapes: Don't they keep the best fruit for themselves?

The Beckstoffer holdings (which also include a couple thousand more acres in Mendocino and Lake Counties) are not only notable for their size but their pedigree. They include some of the top Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards in the state.

The greatest of these vineyards is unquestionably To Kalon. Planted in 1868 by Hamilton Crabb, one of the Valley's earliest pioneers, To Kalon (which means beautiful in Greek) was made famous by Mr. Mondavi, who laid claim to the To Kalon name—he even trademarked it, though he didn't own the entire vineyard. Mr. Beckstoffer purchased part of To Kalon (89 acres) from Beaulieu Vineyards in 1993, and after some wrangling with Mr. Mondavi, he was granted the right to use the name To Kalon in conjunction with his own—Beckstoffer To Kalon a name that all winemakers who buy grapes from this vineyard are entitled to use. (The Mondavi winery uses the To Kalon name for its Fumé Blanc I Block and Cabernet.)



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In addition to To Kalon there are five other historic vineyards in the Beckstoffer portfolio, as well as many nonhistoric vineyards. The historic vineyards include Dr. Crane (planted by Dr. George Belden Crane in 1858), Missouri Hopper, Las Piedras, Georges III and most recently, the Bourn (formerly Hayne) vineyard.

Mr. Beckstoffer is known for spending aggressively to buy the vineyards he wants. According to one Napa source, Mr. Beckstoffer paid \$3.9 million—which would be the second-highest price paid for a Napa vineyard—for the 13-acre Hayne Vineyard, which has famously been the source of some of the best, and priciest, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah in California. (Both Mr. Beckstoffer and Elliott Hayne, the seller of the vineyard, allowed that the \$3.9 million figure was "close" to the selling price.)

"We've been buying vineyards from wineries since the 1980s. We don't ask to buy vineyards. People come to us," Mr. Beckstoffer said as we walked through the Dr. Crane Vineyard, located in the suburbs of St. Helena just down the road from Bourn/Hayne.

Mr. Beckstoffer, a 71-year-old native Virginian with a Southern drawl, got his start in the wine business as a business analyst at the spirits company Heublein in the

1960s, helping the company to negotiate the purchase of famed wineries like Inglenook and Beaulieu. He eventually became president of a Heublein subsidiary he helped to create, the Vinifera Development Company.

When Heublein decided to sell Vinifera in 1973, Mr. Beckstoffer, then 33, decided to buy the subsidiary. He had no money so he took out loans. By 1978, "We were effectively underwater," Mr. Beckstoffer said, but he managed to survive—and never took on investors or partners. "I never wanted to explain my business to anyone," he said. Today he works with his son, David. (Another son, Tuck, is a winemaker.)

Mr. Beckstoffer sells grapes to everyone, from large wineries like Franciscan and Cain and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars to tiny producers like Schrader. Of course, the best blocks (vineyards are divided into "blocks" of

various sizes) of the top Beckstoffer vineyards aren't readily available or easily obtained. For example, the best blocks of To Kalon were secured long ago by top winemakers like Thomas Brown (Schrader Vineyards), Mike Hirby and Paul Hobbs (Paul Hobbs Vineyards).

Mr. Hobbs, who makes acclaimed wine in California and Argentina (and more recently France) has been buying fruit from Mr. Beckstoffer's To Kalon since 1997) and says he has the best blocks or as put it, "the pick of the litter."

"To Kalon produces sublime fruit—truly extraordinary. We could talk for hours about the kind of wine it can produce," Mr. Hobbs said by phone from Argentina. "Of course," he added, "There are blocks that are Porsches and blocks that are more like Volkswagens, although Andy sells them all like they're Porsches." (Mr. Beckstoffer responded rather heatedly that one of the blocks that Mr. Hobbs doesn't work with produced a 98-point wine for Realm Cellars. "Is that a Volkswagen?" he asked.)

The Beckstoffer pricing formula calls for the price of a ton of To Kalon Cabernet grapes to equal 100 times the current retail price of a bottle. (This is true of all his heritage vineyards.) For example, if a bottle of Paul Hobbs Beckstoffer To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon costs \$250 (as it did at my local store) then Mr. Hobbs paid \$25,000 for a ton of the fruit plus a base amount per acre that may vary. By contrast, the average price per ton of (average) Napa Cabernet is just north of \$4,000.

Mr. Beckstoffer says there are two types of people he will not do business with: untalented winemakers and people who brag about how much money they have. But in most cases, he is ready to make a sale. "If they come in looking for To Kalon, my plan is to get them to buy Hayne. I'll tell them, 'I can get you something exciting and new,'" he said over lunch at Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen in St. Helena.

He sat taller in his chair (he's quite tall already) and fixed his eyes upon mine. "If you want to do business with me, you've got to believe," he said, in a deep and sonorous voice.

"You could be a television preacher," I ventured. Mr. Beckstoffer laughed. "Elmer Gantry!" he replied, slamming both hands on the table. Elmer Gantry was the lead character of a Sinclair Lewis novel, a con man turned evangelical preacher.

But unlike Elmer Gantry, Andy Beckstoffer has a genuine cause. It's not just about making money but preserving vineyards—his "stewardship," he says. As we walked through To Kalon Vineyard after lunch, his pride and pleasure was palpable.

"Look at that even spacing; look at the trellising," he said, staring down row after row. "Think of how long this vineyard has been here, of how much great wine it has produced." For Mr. Beckstoffer, this is his contribution and his legacy: He is creating legends in the land.

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Oenofile

Although Andy Beckstoffer doesn't make wine, his grapes go into tens of millions of bottles. Here are five that are worth a search.

**2006 Cain
Cellars Cain
Concept The
Benchlands,
\$55**



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal.

Cain Concept the Benchland 2006; Realm 2005; Franciscan Estate Chardonnay 2007; Paul Hobbs Cabernet Sauvignon 2007; Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Karia Chardonnay 2008

Made from the "benchlands" of Napa (around Oakville, Rutherford and St. Helena) this Cabernet-dominant blend is produced in part with fruit from Beckstoffer's To Kalon, Georges III and Missouri Hopper vineyards. It's rather tight and tannic

right now, but a few hours' decanting reveals an inner core of bright, pure red and black fruit.

2005 Realm Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, \$115

While winemaker Mike Hirby is no longer (as of just recently) making wines at Realm, his legacy is impressive, especially with wines such as this dense, full-bodied Cabernet marked by notes of dark cherry and spice. It's still quite young and a bit tannic but has many years of life ahead.

2007 Franciscan Cuvée Sauvage Carneros Chardonnay, \$30

Franciscan winemaker Janet Myers is a big fan of the Carneros Chardonnay she buys from Andy Beckstoffer; in fact it accounts for a large proportion of her wonderfully lush and honeyed Cuvée Sauvage Chardonnay (the name refers to the wild yeast from which the wine is made).

2007 Paul Hobbs Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, \$250

Although he makes wine all over the world, Paul Hobbs has a special place in his heart (and his portfolio) for his piece of the famed To Kalon Vineyard—as well he should. This is an absolutely stunning wine—lush and rich but elegant and beautifully balanced.

2008 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Karia Chardonnay, \$28

The Beckstoffer Carneros vineyard is also an important source for this appealing Napa Valley Chardonnay. Marked by notes of green apple and pear and a bit of spice, it's a medium-bodied, fairly versatile food wine.