



**Katie Kelly Bell** Contributor

*I scout the globe for the best experiences in wine, food and travel.*

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## California's Next Big Wine Region: The Beckstoffers Bet On Red Hills

In the winemaking world the name Beckstoffer is synonymous with quality but it's truly insufficient to simply say "quality" about the grapes that Andy and David Beckstoffer grow—it's rather like saying "nice" about Ferrari or "good" about Krug Champagne. Many of Napa's most exquisite, sought-after wines are made from Beckstoffer fruit and the duo's fabled [To Kalon Vineyard](#) is globally recognized as one of the finest regions in the world to grow Cabernet Sauvignon. As is often the case with perfectionists like the Beckstoffers, they aren't resting on their To Kalon laurels; instead they have been busy looking for the next thing and they believe it is in the Red Hills of California's Lake County.



California's Red Hills

In fact, they are so confident in the potential of the well-drained Cabernet-friendly soils in Red Hills that they are giving away their best fruit to winemakers willing to take a chance making ultra-premium wines. This past spring the Beckstoffers gave ten lucky winemakers an acre of vineyard fruit each from their Red Hills Amber Knolls Vineyards (for the next three harvests), free of charge. At this time they are not revealing the names of the winemakers, allowing them to

have a chance to make the wine for at least one year before announcing.

During a recent interview, Andy Beckstoffer shared his thinking with me on this unprecedented giveaway. Having worked the soils of Amber Knolls for over 20 harvests Beckstoffer has done what he does best— observe the vines and fruit—and now he thinks things are ready. “At this point, we’ve established the vineyards as a source for good fruit. We are now looking for the sweet spots— that places that will make an ultra-premium wine and we need the winemakers to take a chance with us.” Given the uncharted territory, Beckstoffer understands that he is asking winemakers to produce an ultra-premium quality wine “that will sell for substantially less than the wines we make fruit for in Napa.” Mind you, less (many of the Beckstoffer wines sell for \$350 and upwards a bottle), but not cheap. Beckstoffer isn’t talking about wines that will sell for \$20 a bottle; he is hoping these winemakers will produce something in the \$80 to \$100 range. “We need to see from a viticultural point of view if there really is all the promise we think we have in Red Hills.”

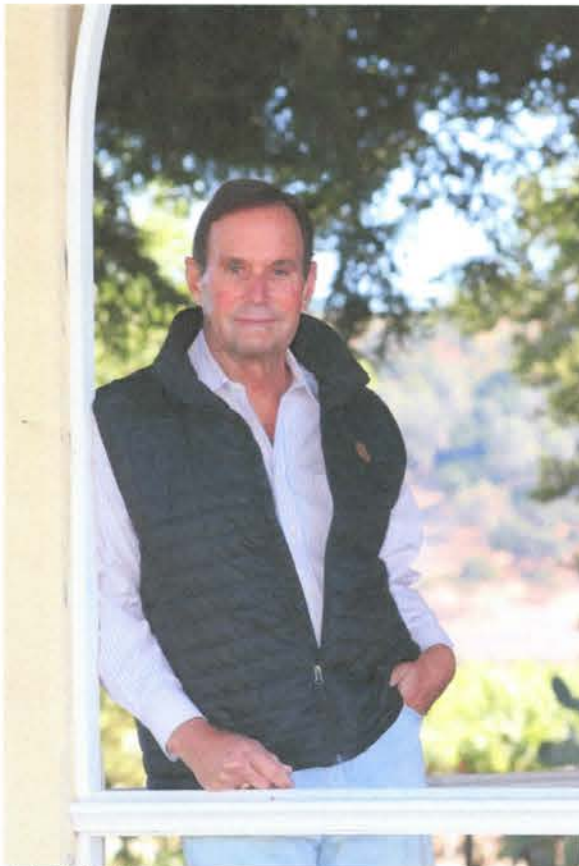
So what is in the Red Hills that caught Beckstoffer’s eye in the first place? He points to climate and dirt. “The location has diurnal shifts, so you get acid balance. Then we have the textbook Cabernet Sauvignon soils that are well drained and volcanic. Now it’s just down to the question of making the fruit perform in the hands of the selected winemakers. We also need to determine if the fruit at Red Hills can justify that \$80 to \$100 price range.”

Beckstoffer isn’t just giving away fruit; he’s also giving away his expertise. Not only do the winning winemakers get free fruit, they also get the benefit of Beckstoffer’s legendary vineyard management skills. It’s his hope that Red Hills can generate the same quality that he’s enjoyed from To Kalon in Napa. “We are going to do for them exactly the same as we do at To Kalon in Napa, —we are not just selling grapes; we are in the business of selling a branded product. We don’t sell Napa or California, we sell To Kalon. It is a vineyard that has proved and distinguished itself over a period of years.”

The interest from winemakers was quite strong, and Beckstoffer did a thorough job of vetting the final candidates. “This is a serious program. We want to know every detail right down to what kind of barrel they plan to use.” In turn, the

Beckstoffers will support the winemakers by customizing the vineyard canopies, carefully monitoring soils and moisture, and tailoring crop loads to optimize fruit quality. After the three-year free of charge program the winemakers will be invited to enter into a long term contract to continue to purchase fruit for their vineyard-designate wine.

I asked him if he ever felt even the least bit tempted to make his own wines. Without skipping a beat he replied, “No, I am not tempted to make wine; we’ve been doing this too long. I’m just not into consumer marketing, or traveling and promoting; I’m into owning the land.” It’s land he’s betting on—we’ll see soon enough if there’s gold in them Red Hills—I’m betting yes.



*Andy Beckstoffer*

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