

# ON WINE

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## Andy Beckstoffer's Lake County project: so far, so good

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In the 1970s, Beckstoffer Vineyards helped pioneer the rise and success of Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley. And now, with limited space left to grow in the region, they're trying to repeat history in the red-headed stepchild of Northern California AVAs: Lake County.

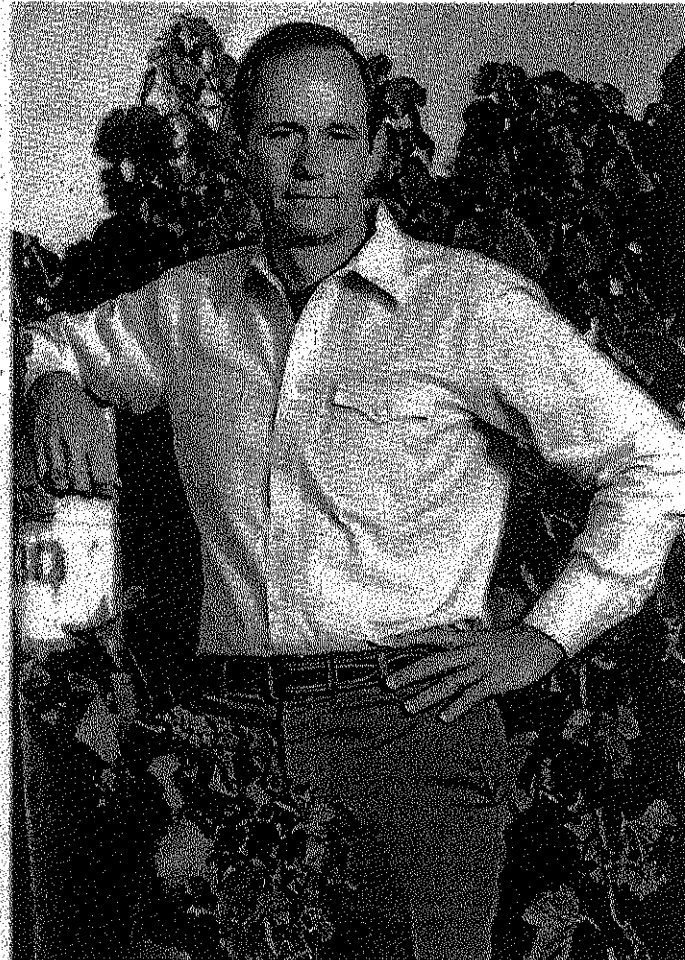
It's going to take some time, but two years into the effort, it's so far, so good.

Andy Beckstoffer started growing Cabernet in the Red Hills AVA of Lake County back in 1997 and currently farms 1,500 acres there. He has long been convinced of the region's potential to produce more than a "blending wine," but the rest of the wine world isn't on board just yet.

The problem is that the proof is in the bottle, but what happens after the grapes leave the vine is not Beckstoffer Vineyards' area of expertise. Their solution: an incentive-based initiative to recruit some of Napa Valley's top winemakers to try their hand at producing a quality Lake County Cabernet priced at \$80-\$100 a bottle.

"We've been at it in Lake County for 20 years now. We know what good Cabernet grapes are like, and we thought that we needed to get somebody to convert them to wine. We just had to set up a system where we could get winemakers to try to have to make great wine in Lake

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

A vintage photo of Andy Beckstoffer, who saw the value of Napa Valley vineyards decades ago and now is promoting the potential of Lake County.

## Project

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County," he said.

The Lake County project launched back in 2016. Beckstoffer Vineyards selected 10 winemakers out of 50 applicants, sponsoring each with one acre of their Lake County grapes for three years. For the 2016, 2017 and 2018 vintages, the participants can do what they'd like with the wine, as long as they don't say where it's sourced.

At the end of the three vintages, the winemakers will then have the option to continue with the grapes, but will be on the hook for the fruit themselves and need to sign a long-term contract with Beckstoffer Vineyards. Starting with 2019, they must release a vineyard-designate Cabernet for \$80-\$100, a range that Beckstoffer believes is an underserved market for Cabernet.

Now two vintages into the program, seven winemakers remain. Three of the original 10 have dropped out — the only female winemaker left before the project began, while the other two pulled out after the 2016 vintage. Beckstoffer said their reasons for leaving had nothing to do with the quality of the fruit, but rather with limitations in timing and resources to fully commit to the side project. He also didn't see a need to re-cast

the three open spots, stating, "If we get three to five to work this program it'll be a major success."

Beckstoffer said he believes the remaining winemakers head into the third and final year of the project optimistically after tasting through the 2016s and 2017s in barrel.

"Everyone is very enthusiastic, and they even seem to be liking the '17s better than '16s," he said. "At this point, I think everybody is extremely pleased. I think they all had good expectations going in that have been met, if not exceeded."

Still, Beckstoffer is playing the long game here. It won't be until the 2020s that any bottles of Beckstoffer Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon will be released. Just like when you plant a new vineyard, you're still several years away from seeing if the project will produce the desired effect.

"Once the wines begin to get known, we'll see what happens. I would hope people would talk not only about our vineyards, but the whole appellation," he said. "This initiative is very serious for us, and you only do it if you're really interested in building the reputation of the whole district. If this works, we will do two things: We will not only change the reputation of Lake County cabernets, but we'll change the economics of growing grapes up there, and that's what we've done in Napa."