

The other Beckstoffer

Jess Lander

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Andy Beckstoffer, left, is the founder and chief executive office of Beckstoffer Vineyards with his son, David Beckstoffer, who is president and chief operating officer.

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Many children in Napa Valley grow up in the wine industry. They spend weekends and hours after school helping their parents or grandparents out in the vineyards and in the cellar, often being groomed to one day join, and even take over the family business, without even realizing it at the time.

The second and third generations are stepping up into larger roles, while their parents loosen their grip and take a few steps back because “it’s time.”

But that was never the plan for David Beckstoffer. Staying in Napa and joining his father’s viticulture empire is not what he ever dreamed of, and it’s not what his father, Andy Beckstoffer, ever pushed for either.

And yet, here we are, far from days when David Beckstoffer, the oldest of the five, was counting down the minutes until he could leave the sleepy Napa Valley.

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“We moved up here when I started high school, and by the time I finished high school, I couldn’t wait to get out of here,” he said. “In the 1970s, this was a farming community. It was not chocolate shops and olive oil stores on Main Street. It was farming parts.”

His father also never put pressure on any of the children to one day join him in the family business, Beckstoffer Vineyards.

“He never even learned to drive a tractor,” joked Andy Beckstoffer.

Instead, David Beckstoffer left town in a hurry, went to business school, and then spent nine years in San Francisco working in finance for Bechtel, the largest construction and civil engineering company in the United States.

Meanwhile, back in Napa, things were changing.

“This was the ‘80s when things were exploding here. It was no longer a sleepy little farming town, it was a globally recognized wine area, and the chocolate shops and olive oil shops and world-class restaurants were starting to sprout up,” he said. “I was at a point in my career where I was doing a lot of traveling, I was working up the corporate ladder and getting to a crossroads. I was starting a family and getting to the point of, ‘Is this the direction I’m going?’”

There was another option, at least he hoped.

“I thought, what about this other opportunity that my father started? Now it’s a place you could actually live, raise a family and have a nice lifestyle,” he said. “I think I kind of shocked him when I said, ‘Is there a place for me in the family company?’”

Andy Beckstoffer’s first response was, “Are you willing to take a pay cut?”

He was.

“We run this like a business, so David fit perfectly with what we were doing and we couldn’t afford him if he weren’t family,” said Andy Beckstoffer.

Today, they run the business together, but in separate offices. Andy Beckstoffer is the chief executive officer and David Beckstoffer is the president and chief operating officer.

“Often, when you have this generational change, the problem is the older guy has nothing to do, but he does what he does, and I do what I do. I don’t want to do what he’s doing and he doesn’t want to do what I’m doing,” said Andy Beckstoffer.

“I solve problems, he looks for opportunity,” echoed David Beckstoffer. “I probably focus more

on operations and our farming people, and he focuses more on land and contracts and winery relationships.”

And while the two are generally on the same page, the younger Beckstoffer has an interest in something his father never has: winemaking.

On sticking to what they know

If you asked Andy Beckstoffer which question he’s most tired of hearing, it’s most definitely, “Why don’t you make your own wine?”

Many growers at least dabble in the other side of the business, keeping a small portion of their grapes for themselves. But for the Beckstoffers, the answer is simple: It’s bad for business.

“Our business is farming, not winemaking,” said David Beckstoffer. “Many people have asked that question, and we’ve done our homework. We’ve actually done analysis of if we were to put a winery on To Kalon for instance, make wine and have a first growth, would it be financially better than selling the grapes under our pricing formula? We could not convince ourselves that would make sense.”

Andy Beckstoffer said he’s seen too many Napa Valley farmers lose their land over the years for making poor business decisions. It’s not a club he wants to join.

“There were a lot of farming families here with good farmers and poor businessmen. They don’t have the land anymore because they were poor businessmen, and we determined that wasn’t going to happen to us,” he said. “Just because you can grow potatoes doesn’t mean you can sell potato chips. It’s a totally different business. It’s not a logical extension.”

But they also say their decision to stick to the vineyard is for the good of Napa Valley as a whole. The way they see it, by selling their grapes, they’re enabling the valley’s most talented winemakers to do what they do best and produce great wine.

“The young winemakers, they’re the ones that are raising the level now, and they can do that because we’re here with these kinds of vineyards and we don’t make wine and can sell to them,” said Andy Beckstoffer. “In terms of making Napa Valley better, you’ve got to have the winemakers and you’ve got to have somebody like us that doesn’t make their own wine.”

“We like being that party,” David Beckstoffer added. “There are very few vineyards that have grapes available at this level, at the \$150 and up a bottle level. We’re one of the places people come to when they’re looking for that level of grapes.”

Still, like many vintners in Napa Valley, the desire was still there to get his hands on just a little bit of that Beckstoffer juice.

Pulling the trigger

“I’ve always had an interest in making wine. I made wine in my tool shed for years as a hobby, and when we bought the Bourn vineyard, I went to Dad and I said, ‘Well, if we’re ever going to do a Beckstoffer Vineyards wine, we’ve got what we know is a heritage-level vineyard, unencumbered, we have the grapes, we can do what we want,’” said David Beckstoffer.

But convincing his dad to get on board wasn't easy.

“His response was, ‘I don't want to make wine, it's not what I want to do. But if you're excited about it, why don't you do your own project, and you can be a client like our other winery clients and buy the grapes from us.’”

Don't be mistaken; there are no handouts here. If anything, David Beckstoffer is overpaying for his fruit, for he's buying petite sirah grapes from Beckstoffer Vineyards at Cabernet pricing. That was dad's condition.

“When we bought it, the vineyard was eight acres of old vine Petite Sirah and four acres of Cabernet. We were going to pull out all the old vine Petite Sirah because financially, even though these vines are beautiful, it's a reality. If you look at Cabernet prices and Petite Sirah prices, it doesn't take you long to figure that out,” said David Beckstoffer, who, with winemaker Benoit Touquette, made a barrel of Petite Sirah that first year for fun before replanting would take place.

“We were blown away. The Petite Sirah was beautiful. So, I convinced dad to let me keep 10 rows of the old vine Petite Sirah and we pulled the rest of it out.”

Those Petite Sirah grapes now go exclusively to David Beckstoffer for his wine Kata, a limited-production Beckstoffer Bourn Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, with roughly 15-20 percent petite sirah, depending on the vintage.

He's also released a second label, Ghost Dog, using his leftover Petite Sirah grapes. At roughly 100 cases, Ghost Dog showcases the Petite Sirah with between 50-60 percent in a blend with cabernet.

But David Beckstoffer wants to be clear: This is a David Beckstoffer project. This is not a Beckstoffer Vineyards wine, and there probably never will be one. It's just not good for business — or the rest of Napa Valley.