

NOTES ON TASTING WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

Replanting To Kalon: A Napa Cabernet Renewal

Andy Beckstoffer's prize parcels of To Kalon are getting an upgrade



Andy Beckstoffer's parcel of To Kalon Vineyard yields some of Napa's most coveted wines. (Greg Gorman)



By James Molesworth

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Senior editor James Molesworth is *Wine Spectator's* lead taster for California Cabernet Sauvignon [<https://www.winespectator.com/webfeature/show/id/California-Tasting-Beat-Changes>]. He recently returned to Napa Valley for more visits with top wineries. And don't miss our Q&A with James [<https://www.winespectator.com/webfeature/show/id/James-Molesworth-California-Wine-Q-A>] on his Napa Cab eureka moments, his scoring philosophy, and what he's up to when he's not tasting wine.

There are plenty of well-worn adages in the wine business. Some are a bit overworn, actually. You've surely heard "wine is made in the vineyards." No one ever argues with it ...

As we walk the rows in his [To Kalon Vineyard](https://www.winespectator.com/webfeature/show/id/50729) [<https://www.winespectator.com/webfeature/show/id/50729>] blocks in Oakville, Andy Beckstoffer [<https://www.winespectator.com/magazine/show/id/54752>] recites the line. I click my pen open and closed, waiting for something a bit more compelling to happen.

"But that's B.S.," he says. "Wine is made by winemakers." My ears perked up. He kept it rolling.

Beckstoffer, 79, draws deep water in Napa Valley. He's been farming vineyards here since 1969. In 1993 he secured arguably his [prize piece](https://www.winespectator.com/magazine/show/id/6042) [<https://www.winespectator.com/magazine/show/id/6042>], a nearly 90-acre block of vines in To Kalon Vineyard that was being offloaded

by Beaulieu Vineyard [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Beaulieu+Vineyard]. Today prime Napa Valley land goes for at least \$400,000 an acre, sometimes near \$1 million. Beckstoffer got the parcel for \$44,000 an acre. And he got it without a fight.

"No, no one else was bidding for it," he says when I ask who else was in the mix. "It was virused and needed replanting at the time. BV and Bob [Mondavi] didn't want to deal with it."

Today Beckstoffer farms 1,000 acres in the valley. The Beckstoffer To Kalon fruit goes to 20 different producers and a handful of Napa's top hired-gun winemakers use it to produce **some of the valley's most sought-after bottlings** [<https://www.winespectator.com/magazine/show/id/54753>]. And Beckstoffer says it's they who make the wine.

"Well, first thing I ask when someone approaches me to buy fruit is, 'Who's the winemaker?'" says Beckstoffer.

"To be honest, we don't tell them how to make wine, and they don't tell us how to farm," he says matter-of-factly. "Now sometimes you can get too close to the forest, so if there's a better way and I can't see it and they bring it to us, we'll do it. But generally that doesn't happen."

In addition to his portion of To Kalon, Beckstoffer holds some of Napa's "heritage" sites, as he calls them. Vineyards with histories of red wine production going back to the late 19th-century. There's 300 acres of the Georges III Vineyard, 40 acres in Missouri Hopper, 20 in Dr. Crane, 20 in Las Piedras and 13 in Bourne.

"I never wanted to make wine. I grew up in Smirnoff country. I bought United Vintners and then I met farmers," he says. "And I decided I liked farmers better than salesmen. And I just like farming the land."

"A great wine region has to do two things. Its wines have to match with foods. And its wines have to stand the test of time. Those heritage vineyards have proven to stand the test of time, as they've been making great grapes for over a hundred years. And when they started, it wasn't Cabernet. It was Mondeuse and things like that. If you can make a Mondeuse that gets famous, and then a Cabernet that gets famous from the same piece of land, that's special land."



As we come to a break in the vineyard rows, the parcel facing us is a new replant. It's a particularly expensive proposition to take the land out of production when it's this kind of real estate. But virus has eventually worn the block down, and it was time. To mollify his clients, everyone buying fruit from his To Kalon parcels took less fruit, whether their rows were in the block or not. He'll use the same procedure as he rotates in other replants in the coming years. That way no one gets left out.

What pops out is the new row alignment, east-west instead of north-south, with the aim to get the blast of hot afternoon sun off the grapes. What might seem like a nod to changing wine styles, with more powerful, high-alcohol wines seeing some pushback in the market is less that, and more just about farming. "Better farming gets better grapes," he says. "New plantings get changed because we've improved what we know and technology has improved. It's simply about delivering a better product to my customers."

The To Kalon Vineyard name has been in dispute for years (and *remains so, to some degree* [<https://www.winespectator.com/webfeature/show/id/Lawsuit-Filed-Against-Constellation-Over-Mondavis-Alleged-Misuse-of-To-Kalon>]). A trademark was claimed by Robert Mondavi in 1988; the name was created in the late 1800s by Hamilton Crabb for his wine company. In the early 2000s, Beckstoffer started putting the To Kalon name on fruit from his section of the vineyard, and Mondavi promptly sued *Schrader Cellars* [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Schrader+Cellars] for putting the name on its label. Beckstoffer countersued, and a settlement was eventually reached by which the fruit from Beckstoffer's portion of the vineyard could be labeled Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard. Constellation (which *bought Robert Mondavi Winery in 2004* [https://www.winespectator.com/webfeature/show/id/A-970-Million-Bid-for-Mondavi_2238]), as well as *Schrader Cellars* in 2017 [<https://www.winespectator.com/webfeature/show/id/Constellation-Paid-60-Million-for-Schrader>]) owns the trademark now, and the agreement with Beckstoffer still stands. And it's on this point that Beckstoffer takes a farmer's stand, unlike when he defers to a winemaker.

"This is like *DRC* [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&page=1&winery=roman%C3%A9&text_search_flag=wine_plus_vintage&search_by=all&scorelow=-1&scorehigh=-1&pricelow=-1&pricehigh=-1&case_prod=null_case_prod&taste_date=&issue_date=&issue_year=&varietal%5B%5D=null_varietal®ions%5B%5D=null_regions&vintage%5B%5D=&size=15&sort_by=score&sort_dir=desc]. There should be a Beckstoffer To Kalon and a MacDonald To Kalon," he says, mentioning one of the smaller growers in the vineyard. "If we're going to present Napa Valley to the world then the vineyard needs integrity. The name should be about the land, not a trademark."

That final sentence hangs there as we find ourselves back at the starting point. After completing a full loop of his parcel. After farming for 50 years in the valley, I can't help but think he must have timed it that way.

Follow James Molesworth on Instagram at @jmolesworth1 [<http://instagram.com/jmolesworth1/>], and on Twitter at @jmolesworth1 [<http://twitter.com/jmolesworth1>].