

Beckstoffer's next quest — transform Lake County into wine country



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Grapegrower Andy Beckstoffer is famous for helping transform grape-growing in Napa Valley into a highly lucrative, luxury-branded business, able to fetch some of the highest-priced cabernet sauvignon grapes in the world. Now he intends to expand his branding prowess to his vineyards in the Red Hills appellation of Lake County.

“We believe that the fruit from our Amber Knolls vineyard is the pearl of the Red Hills,” he said in his native Virginia drawl at his Rutherford office.

Beckstoffer was referring to his 1,200-cabernet-acre vineyard in Lake County. Up to now, most of the fruit he has produced there has been sold to larger producers, including Clos du Bois and Joel Gott wines, although some has found its way into the hands of elite winemakers such as Thomas Brown and other luminaries.

“We’re not in the commodity business,” Beckstoffer said. “We’re in the branded-product business, and we believe that Amber Knolls cab could be in the \$80- to \$100-per-bottle category of vineyard-designated wine. We are so sure that we are willing to give away 10 acres’ worth of free fruit to prove it.”

Beckstoffer was referring to his newest strategy to give 10 winemakers an acre’s worth of cabernet sauvignon grapes for three vintages. Winemakers can apply by Feb. 15 by submitting their cover letters and résumés. According to the Beckstoffer website, qualifications for the applying winemakers include a minimum of five years in winemaking production and knowledge and experience in producing ultra-premium cabernet sauvignon.

“We hope the applicants include both established, well-known vintners as well as up-and-comers,” said David Beckstoffer.

David is one of Beckstoffer’s sons, and since 1997 he has helped his father run the Beckstoffer Vineyards operation, which oversees the farming of roughly 3,600 acres in Napa Valley, Mendocino County and the Red Hills of Lake County.

Beyond being provided free grapes, the chosen winemakers will help with the farming decisions that apply to their selected acre.

“Typically, we harvest grapes mechanically up there, but for the acres picked by our chosen winemakers we’ll treat the farming just like our most premier vineyards in Napa Valley, harvesting by hand and reducing the crop loads to 3 or so tons an acre,” David said. “All our vineyards are farmed sustainably, but the winemakers will have a say in farming decisions such as yield, pruning, irrigation and other issues that are key to grape quality.”

Many winemakers are excited by this opportunity.

"I threw my name into the hat because this seems like a very exciting opportunity to explore a new wine-growing area and work with an amazing farming company," wrote Keith Emerson in an email.

A Boston native, Emerson consults for many brands and is Napa's Vineyard 29 director of winemaking. He and his partner also have their own brand, Emerson Brown Wines.

"I have worked with the Beckstoffer team at a few of their other ranches for several years and have had nothing but the best experiences," Emerson wrote. "While I have only worked with one Red Hills, Lake County cabernet vineyard, I have tasted several wines made from these vineyards and have a basic understanding of the flavor profile that these unique vineyards produce. There is a lot to learn up there in the Red Hills, and I want to be a part of it."

What is the motivation behind what they are calling "a grape opportunity"? Beckstoffer said, "We'll get a better understanding of how different parts of the vineyard perform, and because the winning winemakers must use the best barrels and the best techniques, we'll have a better understanding of what winemaking seems to work."

Beyond that, Beckstoffer hopes that after three years of working with what he says is exceptional-quality fruit, each winemaker will take advantage of their option to sign a long-term contract for the fruit.

"We believe that this program is good for us but also for the winemakers and even for Lake County as a whole," he said. "We think our vineyards in the Red Hills are producing exceptional cabernet, and when the right people see what the vineyard can do, they'll understand the exceptional opportunity. Eventually, if this works as expected, this will help draw more businesses to the area, including hotels, restaurants and more wineries."

Beckstoffer imagines a day when Lake County is synonymous with what people think of as California Wine Country. Of course, that would also mean he could charge higher prices for his grapes, which provides pause for at least one potential applicant.

"I think the fruit can be beautiful from up there," said a Napa Valley winemaker who asked not to be named. "I considered applying, but right now I can get very good cab from up there at a decent price and then sell the wine for \$20 or \$30 a bottle with no strings attached."

Will Red Hills AVA become California's newest, hottest wine country? With Beckstoffer's track record and reputation, few would bet against it. Or as Keith Emerson wrote, "The Beckstoffer name speaks for itself, and if Andy is betting on Amber Knolls, that seems like something that I'd like to be in on!"

For Beckstoffer, the path is clear.

"We intend on establishing Amber Knolls as a premium brand," he said and then smiled widely. "Look, when I got here back in the 1960s, ToKalon cabernet was being used in a blended wine at Beaulieu. At that time, most people didn't understand that the greatest wines actually came from great vineyards. They were thinking that if there was a great wine, then it must be the winemaker. But now we all know that it's the vineyard that makes all the difference."

Interested winemakers can submit résumés and cover letters to info@beckstoffervineyards.com or learn more at

www.cmilancomm.com/assets/upload/files/beckstoffer/OpportunityBeckstofferVineyards_FNL_1.19.16