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Legendary grape grower betting Lake County will be the next Wine Country

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Photo: Scott Strazzante, The Chronicle



Andy (right) and David Beckstoffer at Amber Knolls Vineyard in Seigler Springs, Calif., on Thursday, January 7, 2016.

Andy Beckstoffer is a legend in California wine; is there any other way to put it?

The grape grower owns what is certainly California's most famous, and probably most expensive, vineyard: To Kalon, in the heart of Napa Valley. To Kalon is a vineyard with an aura. Winemakers speak in hushed tones about the prospect of handling its Cabernet; wines that bear the vineyard's name drown in 100-point scores. And To Kalon is merely the jewel in a crown of sites that represent modern Napa Valley royalty — Beckstoffer's Dr. Crane, George III, Las Piedras and other vineyards, too, are secured in the canon of the valley's great terroirs. Long after the deaths of pioneers like André Tchelistcheff and Robert Mondavi, Beckstoffer is one of Napa's last legends standing.

But today, Beckstoffer and I aren't in Napa. In fact, we're not in a place popularly associated with high-quality wine grapes at all. We're in Lake County, where Beckstoffer owns the 1,200-acre Amber Knolls vineyard in the Red Hills AVA.

From its peak at 2,500 feet above sea level, Amber Knolls is dramatic. Not simply in the way that all vineyards are beautiful — there's always something irresistible about that precise geometry imposed on boundless nature — but also, even more, in the way Amber Knolls seems to cloak an otherwise virgin, empty swath of Lake County. You get the sense that this monolithic series of vines isn't one of many vineyards here but is *the* vineyard here, the single event, the locus.

That impression of singularity suits Andy Beckstoffer just fine.

"We've got the pearl of the Red Hills," Beckstoffer, 76, says. "There won't be many developments of this scale here anymore."

Beckstoffer is notorious for his sky-high grape prices, and famously unapologetic for pioneering an unorthodox pricing scheme. In the 1970s, he began charging for grapes based on the revenue that his clients (winemakers)

were generating from their wine sales; generally, grape pricing works the other way around, where a grower sets the fruit price and the winemaker sets his bottle prices accordingly. “I’m not going to say it was an overnight success,” Beckstoffer says, grinning. His fee has evolved over time, and for his highest-caliber Napa vineyards he now asks for 175 times the bottle price of a wine, so that a winemaker charging \$200 for a bottle (which is not at To Kalon’s high end) pays \$35,000 per ton of grapes. His minimum price per ton is \$17,500. In 2014, the average price for a ton of Napa Cab grapes was about \$5,800.

Which makes it all the more remarkable that Beckstoffer is about to give away Cabernet from Amber Knolls for free.

It’s a move without precedent, all the more shocking given Beckstoffer’s typically prodigious profits. Here’s how it will work: Interested winemakers can submit resumes and cover letters to [Beckstoffer](#). He will select 10 worthy candidates and will give each an acre’s worth of Cabernet, gratis, for three vintages. Each winemaker can select whichever acre block she’d like.

By Beckstoffer’s own admission, the Amber Knolls program is a publicity stunt — but one that he believes serves a deeper purpose. “If one winemaker makes great wine, the winemaker must be great,” he says. “But if 10 winemakers make great wine, maybe it’s the vineyard that’s great.”

Or maybe even the region. “We’ve got to get the right people to come to Lake County.”

Lake and Napa were once a single county, but they separated in 1861. There’s been a Lake wine industry (albeit a small one) since the 19th century, when British actress Lillie Langtry established a winery in what is now the Guenoc Valley AVA.

Somehow, Lake County missed out on the wine boom that its neighbors enjoyed in the late 20th century. Sparsely developed, Lake got a reputation as a place where big guys like Beringer and Kendall-Jackson grew blending grapes for inexpensive, North Coast-appellated wines. And although Napa 30 years ago wasn't exactly a booming metropolis either, Lake County "was all RVs and beer cans," as Beckstoffer puts it.

But while Lake County wasn't known for premium wine, it also never became volume-driven. It was and remains tiny, with less than 9,000 planted vineyard acres; compare that with Napa's 45,000 and Sonoma's 60,000. Not maligned like, say, Lodi, it's simply been off the radar of most people.

If not for the 1861 split, this would have been prime wine country, Beckstoffer points out. "Just imagine if Bob Mondavi had come to Middletown."

I decided I had to see this vineyard for myself. As the Beckstoffers and I drive from Napa to Amber Knolls, the clusters of wineries on Howell Mountain empty out into barren Butts Canyon. The scorch of the recent wildfires is everywhere, singed slopes of black earth framing the road. That Napa's spillover will be forced into this no man's land eventually seems obvious.

Today, both Andy and his son David, 54, who helps him run the business, are dressed the part of dirt farmers in worn brown jackets, jeans and boots. But don't be fooled. These dirt farmers have Ivy League MBAs — Beckstoffer, from Dartmouth's Tuck; David, from Pennsylvania's Wharton. They're no yeomen. They know what they're doing.

Beckstoffer speaks in the mellifluous drawl of his native Virginia. A true businessman, he's exceedingly articulate, well-rehearsed, quietly confident. "We're not in the commodity business," Beckstoffer says, leaning over from the driver's seat of his Lexus SUV. "We're in the branded product business."

Which means he's not interested simply in selling grapes at a profit — he's doing that at Amber Knolls already — but in establishing Amber Knolls as a premium brand, as he's done so successfully with his Napa sites. So promising is this area, he believes, that it's only a matter of infrastructure (restaurants and tasting rooms to lure wine tourists) and exposure (high-visibility winemakers) before the world understands the potential of the Red Hills for Cabernet.

When we finally arrive and roam the vineyard, I start to see what they've gotten so worked up about. Amber Knolls' extreme elevation, coupled with the clarity of the air (there's no industry nearby to pollute it), gives great sun exposure, which can lead to thick grape skins with intense phenolics. It's arid, never foggy. Its position on a north-facing slope restrains the intense heat. Groundwater is abundant across all 1,200 acres. Most striking is the soil: Volcanic matter blown over from nearby Mount Konocti, this red dirt is studded with glassy black obsidian rock, packed about 12 feet deep.

What does Beckstoffer want to accomplish here? “We want to see if we can vineyard-designate Amber Knolls, and if we can get people to make \$80 to \$100 bottles of wine,” he says. He hopes that the applicants for his grape giveaway program will include both established, well-known vintners as well as up-and-comers. The prerequisites: They must have a record of making good Cabernet, “and they must use the best barrels, the best techniques,” he says.

The hype is already working. “I'm definitely going to apply,” Greg Harrington, owner of Washington's Gramercy Cellars, told me later. “The opportunity to work with someone like Andy Beckstoffer would be amazing — plus there's the soil profile, all that obsidian.” Jack Bittner, owner of Franz Hill Vineyard, added: “New regions don't always get somebody who has that kind of knowledge and dedication to viticulture. It's going to take someone like Andy to give it real recognition and credibility.”

The real objective, Beckstoffer says, is to make Lake County wine country: “Give us 40 years, and we just might do it.”

Hearing a grape grower talk about branding is a new one for me. Beckstoffer repeats his mantra over the course of the day, “We’re farmers second, entrepreneurs first.” His company prides itself on seamless logistics and customer service. He won’t invest in small parcels: “We weren’t going to come all the way up here to farm just 300 acres.” For the most part, they harvest grapes mechanically, not by hand. And whereas many growers wax poetic about the diversity in their soil types, Beckstoffer loves Amber Knolls for its clean uniformity. “You won’t hear us talking about the romance of wine,” says David Beckstoffer.

Yet there is romance in the Beckstoffers’ project here — the romance of the frontier, of forging a new path in a nascent land. The Amber Knolls aesthetic enacts this. A new office on the property is styled like “old-time western Sierra Hills country.” Beckstoffer’s cabin here is lined with antique Americana, including a vintage 48-star American flag. It’s all part of the dirt farmer persona that Beckstoffer inhabits, and delivers with a wink.

“There’s always been this sense in the Red Hills that ‘the railroad is coming,’” laughs Randy Krag, the Amber Knolls viticulturist. He jokes, but he’s right. And the implication is clear: that Beckstoffer is the baron — the visionary who will transform nothing into something, Lake County into wine country. Maybe the true payoff here is the exclusive right to that glory. How many dollars per ton is that worth?



