

Napa Valley Register

Meet Napa's power players

By Esther Mobley

There's an overshared, clichéd joke that people in Napa love to repeat.

How do you make a small fortune in the wine industry? Start with a big fortune.

Certainly, that would describe the trajectory of countless Napa Valley vintners. A person makes their money in San Francisco or New York in real estate, or software, or venture capital, then buys a splashy vineyard in St. Helena or Rutherford, builds a mansion on it, hires a pricey winemaker and spends the next several years admiring the beautiful vistas while wondering whether they'll ever make their investment back. For some, the investment may not even be the point: It's about the dream of owning a slice of Napa Valley.

But an enterprising few have found a different path. If they started with a big fortune, they've amassed an even larger one. The key, for many of these successful entrepreneurs, lies with land acquisition.

Longtime power players like Andy Beckstoffer and Jean-Charles Boisset have known this for years, grabbing desirable vineyard and winery properties over the last few decades. Now, they're joined by a new generation of figures like Gaylon Lawrence Jr. and Scott Becker — each of them acquiring new parcels at a different pace, with a different scope in mind, but all with a clear strategic vision. Meanwhile, established wine companies like Far Niente and Duckhorn have moved suddenly into periods of major expansion.

The moves of these magnates matter. At 43,000 acres, Napa Valley's winegrowing footprint is limited. (For comparison, Sonoma County has 60,000 acres of grapes, and Lodi 100,000.) Virtually all of its plantable land is already spoken for. Over time, it's inevitable that ownership of Napa land will concentrate in fewer hands, especially as larger corpora-

tions like Gallo, Constellation and Treasury continue to buy up family-owned wineries. That means that every merger and acquisition counts. However small, it tilts the balance of power.

Here are the Napa Valley's empire builders worth watching in the coming years.



Illustrations by Stephanie Zhu / The Chronicle

Napa's original empire builder

Name: Andy Beckstoffer

Winery: No winery, but Beckstoffer owns some of Napa Valley's top marquee vineyards, including To Kalon, Georges III, Missouri Hopper and Dr. Crane

Acreage: 1,215 acres in Napa Valley

Why he matters: Andy Beckstoffer's vineyards are more than just plots of land. They're brands in themselves, especially the To Kalon Vineyard, considered by some to be the finest source of Cabernet Sauvignon anywhere in California. By elevating the status of his vineyards to such a high level, Beckstoffer — who grows grapes and sells them to wineries, never making any wine himself — invented a new model for grape farming. He emphasized the quality of the raw grapes, rather than the skill of the winemaker, as the key factor that would determine the ultimate wine. For his

The flamboyant, French-born magnate

Name: Jean-Charles Boisset

Wineries: JCB Collection, 1881 Napa, Durant & Booth, Elizabeth Spencer, Raymond, plus others in Sonoma County, France and elsewhere

Acreage: Company would not disclose exact acreage

Why he matters: When Jean-Charles Boisset made his latest acquisition — Elizabeth Spencer Winery in Rutherford, in late 2021 — he joked to The Chronicle that Highway 29, the major artery running through Napa Valley, should be renamed the “Boisset Highway.” Indeed, the Burgundy native, who is married to powerful vintner Gina Gallo, now owns property in each of the valley’s major towns, from Napa to Calistoga. It’s impossible to go very far here without encountering the JCB machine.

And it’s impossible to not know when you’ve encountered a JCB property, since the vintner’s aesthetic is unmistakable. Swarovski crystals adorn everything, leopard print makes many appearances, and some walls are cloaked in velvet. At Raymond, the legacy winery in St. Helena that Boisset purchased in 2009, there’s even a “tasting room” for dogs, called Frenchie Winery (see Cesar Hernandez’s review of the Raymond tasting experience). It’s not just wineries — he’s also opened a boutique hotel, a cheese shop, a day spa, a clothing boutique, a fast-casual restaurant in a former train depot, even a “wine museum.” Boisset’s vision for Napa is eye-catching and maximalist, focused above all on the hospitality experience. Some might call it over the top; Boisset calls it sexy.



Illustrations by Stephanie Zhu / The Chronicle

The CEO of the legacy Napa brand that’s on a land-grabbing tear

Name: Steve Spadarotto

Wineries: Far Niente, Nickel & Nickel, Dolce, EnRoute, Bella Union, Post & Beam

Acreage: 533 acres in Napa Valley

Why he matters: Most wineries with the kind of history and stability of Far Niente would be content to uphold the status quo. It was founded in 1885 by the Gold Rusher John Benson, a relative of the famous painter Winslow Homer, and revived in 1979 by the Nickel family. Although it generated two notable spin-offs earlier in its life — the desert-wine brand Dolce in 1989, and Nickel & Nickel in 1997 — the winery, now led by CEO Steve Spadarotto, has suddenly kicked into fast-growth mode.

The company has launched new spin-off brands in recent years — EnRoute, Bella Union and Post & Beam — and has meanwhile been grabbing desirable land at an astonishing clip. In 2021, Far Niente purchased a large vineyard in Napa’s Carneros region, then acquired the well-known Provenance Winery. It killed the Provenance brand, choosing instead to turn its Highway 29 winery into a new facility for Far Niente’s existing projects. At this kind of speed, it’s anyone’s guess where Far Niente’s land grab will go next.

