

Napa in Flux

These 8 power players are reshaping the future of Napa Valley wine

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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 [Juan Pablo Torres Padilla](#) — 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.

San Francisco Chronicle

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 corporations 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.

Click the cards to learn more about each empire builder

Napa's original empire builder

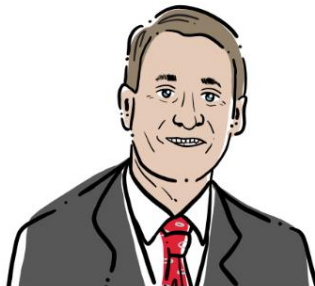


Andy Beckstoffer

1,215 acres in Napa Valley

Winery: None. But Beckstoffer owns some of Napa Valley's marquee vineyards, including To Kalon, Georges III, Missouri Hopper and Dr. Crane

The mysterious Arkansas ag billionaire



Gaylon Lawrence Jr.

600 acres in Napa Valley

Winery: Heitz, Burgess, Stony Hill, Brendel, Ink Grade, Haynes

San Francisco Chronicle

The flamboyant, French-born magnate



Jean-Charles Boisset

Company would not disclose exact acreage owned

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

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



Steve Spadarotto

533 acres in Napa Valley

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

The AI executive who's just getting started



Juan Pablo Torres Padilla

40 acres in Napa Valley

Winery: Sullivan Rutherford Estate

San Francisco Chronicle

The leader behind Napa's \$300 million IPO



Alex Ryan

379 acres in Napa Valley

Winery: Duckhorn Vineyards, Paraduxx Winery, plus others in California and Washington state

The vintners driving a new generation of “cult” wine



Scott Becker and Benoit Touquette

About 200 acres in Napa Valley

Winery: Realm Cellars

Within the universe of ultra-expensive Napa wines, Realm has something of a rags-to-riches tale. The winery was on the verge of bankruptcy when Scott Becker and a group of other investors purchased it in the early 2010s, enduring a visible period of mismanagement and disappointing wine reviews from critics. Becker and head winemaker Benoit Touquette turned the ship around, recasting Realm in the model of the “cult” Cabernet producers — the Harlans, Colgins, Bryants et al — that had preceded it a generation earlier. Its wines now command as much as \$500 on release.

Unlike the earlier cult Cabernet producers, most of whom opted to remain bound to a single, small estate, Realm has steadily expanded its footprint in Napa. First came the Hartwell Estate in 2015, a Stags Leap District property with a winery and 15 acres of grapevines; later, Realm grew that property by acquiring two adjacent plots. In 2018 it arranged for a long-term lease on two-thirds of the Farella Vineyard, arguably the most famous site in the Coombsville appellation of southern Napa. In June, Realm purchased the Houyi Vineyard and Nine Suns winery, a lauded site located in one of the valley’s most exclusive corners, Pritchard Hill.

Update: An earlier version of this story misstated the nature of Realm’s agreement with the Farella Vineyard. Realm holds a long-term lease for two-thirds of the vineyard.