



Outtakes from the Napa auction

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March of the umbrellas. (Photo: Craig Lee/Special to The Chronicle)

Just back from a trip to the Sierras, but before the week is out I wanted to share a few more tidbits about the Napa wine auction, which passed the \$100 million total fundraising mark this year:

Usually the Napa auction is an excuse to gawk at the very rich, and consider how much money they're throwing at things that we can neither afford nor really appreciate.

This year, however, someone was clearly tuned into occasional criticism that more attention should be paid to the recipients of the largesse. Nonprofit directors fanned out to Friday-night dinners to explain their work — and encourage the attendees to think big at the following day's auction.

"Your guys' money helps make our program one of the best in California," Kathy DeMaggio, manager of Clinic Ole's Healthy Moms and Babies, told a group assembled at Spottswoode in St. Helena. That's a welcome full-circle sign. The Napa auction was inspired by a far longer tradition of wine-based philanthropy. When the Mondavi family chaired the first auction in 1981, they were inspired by the Hospice de Beaune, in which unique Burgundy lots are sold to raise cash for the local hospital. As Mondavi saw the potential for Napa to rival other wine regions, he saw its ability for big-scale philanthropy.

Speaking of Mondavi, even Robert Mondavi's widow Margrit was taken aback by the "King Lear"-quality setting of the auction. ("Spit, fire! Spout, rain!")

Record downpours turned what's often a blistering hot day under the tent into a damp affair. While heads stayed mostly dry as sheets of rain cascaded down, the ground on Meadowood's golf course underneath couldn't help but be turned into a muddy slop — marking the first time in three decades the auction was held under wet skies.

"We've never had it like this," Margrit noted.

The auction's top lot offered a cast of very familiar characters. The goodies? Vintner Garen Staglin and chef Michael Chiarello, both masters at generating buzz, tethered resources for a lot that hit \$600,000 when it was doubled for two bidders.

The particulars: A two-night Napa tour; dinner and cooking classes from Chiarello; a walkthrough by Chiarello of his own vineyards; a walkthrough of the Staglin property from them and vineyard maestro David Abreu; and a whole mess of large-format bottles.

And the two lucky folk? The first was perennial high bidder John Thompson of Woodside, former CEO of Symantec, a friend of Staglin's and (if the real-estate gods shine) a soon-to-be resident of Napa. The other was one of Staglin's fellow vintners, Dan Duckhorn.

No surprise there: A large chunk of the proceeds always come from the neighborhood. Vintners love to bid on each others' lots, enough that paddle No. 1 — given to the prior year's top bidder — was in the hand of Mary Miner of Oakville Ranch winery, widow of Oracle co-founder Bob Miner.

"We feel very strongly that not only do we get together to make this happen," said auction chairman K.R. Rombauer of Rombauer Vineyards, "but as businesses it's our turn to step up and give back as well."

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Any successful bidder in the room could easily buy the wine at hand, so wineries have had to seek unique add-ons.

But this point was especially driven home by Saturday's first lot: an all-expenses-paid trip to Los Angeles to the finale of ABC's "Dancing with the Stars," including dance lessons with one of the show's dancers.

"The things they're raising money for are fantastic," said "Stars" producer Conrad Green, explaining why he had chipped in. "It's a rural place, but it's surrounded by money."

The lot was purchased by siblings Candice and Michael Uytengsu of Atherton, CEO of Somersault Snack Co.

"My mother is such a devoted fan. We had to do it for her," Michael said.

It's always interesting to me that many auction lots tout access to winemakers and private vineyard tours. Those are basically things that wine writers do as part of our daily work. It's a healthy reminder that what we consider pro forma is something that the deep-pocketed will pay dearly for — not unlike thinking how much press-box seats at AT&T Park would go for on the open market.

But that strategy has been honed as the valley's competition in charity has become more lavish — offering cars, jewelry, private jets and more. It has also become more crucial as Napa's wine charity peer, the Naples Winter Wine Festival, has included ever more fancy lots — including one this year with a Ferrari 458 Italia.

So while every lot includes wine, Napa now dabbled far more in cars and the like — including a last-minute lot that included dinner for 20 at Gott's Roadside Tray Gourmet and a 1956 Austin Healey donated by Jones, which went for \$90,000.

"As I was driving it up there, I admit I thought, 'Oh God, what have I done?'" Jones said.

(If you're wondering what happened to the original lot from Frank Family Vineyards, one of its key components — a walk-on role on USA's "Royal Pains" — was in doubt. Sorry to be the bearer, "Pains" fans.)

The wine-and-beyond theme was perhaps best executed by one lot, intended to echo the auction's presumed focus this year on California, from Chappellet Vineyard and Winery. It included a posh tour not only through Napa but also stays at Montecito's San Ysidro Ranch and Big Sur's Post Inn Ranch. Two bidders each paid \$200,000 for the package.

Higher ticket prices for the Friday barrel auction — now at \$350, up \$100 from last year — were a subtle message that Friday, too, had become a time for serious bidding.

Not that it deterred anyone. Tickets sold out in seven minutes, with nearly 2,000 showing up at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone to sample dim sum from an Airstream trailer and fresh oysters — and of course to taste wine.

"I've never seen so much activity on the board," said Stephanie Putnam, winemaker for Raymond Vineyards, pouring tastes of her 2009 special blend Cabernet.

In the end Friday's take topped \$1.3 million, including a new high bid on a case from Shafer Vineyards, the perennial top barrel lot.

"There's new people that have never heard of it, but they go for the number," said Shafer winemaker Elias Fernandez.

Bargain hunters were everywhere.

"[Chateau Montelena's] Bo Barrett just came by and said this is the sleeper of the show," said Tim Carl, who was pouring tastes of his Knights Bridge label. "That's what people are looking for."

Still, the venue was not without its challenges, including one narrow second-floor hallway hit by the same off scent found in bad corks that can ruin wine.

"It's totally corked in that room!" exclaimed one woman as she sat nearby.

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