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ANV's Barrel Auction raises \$1.2 million

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David Stoneberg | Posted: Thursday, June 9, 2011 12:00 am | (0) Comments

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St. Helena's Model Bakery was one of 45 Napa Valley restaurants serving the crowd Friday at the Marketplace. They are, from left, Chelsea Radcliffe, owner Karen Mitchell, and Edgar Zecua. David Stoneberg photos



Top 10 barrel auction lots

- Shafer Vineyards
- Kongsgaard
- Joseph Phelps Vineyards
- ROY Estate
- Crocker & Starr wines
- Dariosh
- Alpha Omega
- Spottswode Estate
- Vineyard & Winery
- Pride Mountain Vineyards
- Knights Bridge Winery

Six buses transported about 2,000 people — volunteers, vendors, vintners, foodies and bidders — from throughout the Napa Valley on Friday to the Culinary Institute of America, Greystone.

The Napa Valley Vintners' Barrel Auction and Marketplace was a celebration of all things food and wine, with 100 vintners pouring cabernet sauvignon thieved from French oak barrels in the room that houses the Vintners Hall of Fame. Each of the vintners donated 10 cases of their cabernets, ready to be released sometime in 2012, as part of the 2011 Auction Napa Valley. Bidding for the future lots was brisk throughout the afternoon. The top lot was the cabernet sauvignon from Schrader. Its 10 cases sold for \$59,500. Overall, the barrel auction raised \$1.2 million.

Four dozen of the Napa Valley's top restaurateurs served bites in the Marketplace to go along with the wines served by another 100 members of the Napa Valley Vintners. Some of those pouring everything from sauvignon blanc to cabernet sauvignon were auctioning off their wines as part of the e-auction, which raised \$370,000 from 93 successful bidders.

Honorary chairs for Auction Napa Valley were the Rombauer family, Koerner and Sandy Rombauer and Koerner's son, K.R. and wife Laura. On Friday, Koerner said organizing the auction was a lot of hard work, then he laughed and added, "Because my boy did it all. It is very well organized, this is the 31st year and they've got a pretty good book on how to do things." Rombauer, who has been part of the event since it began in 1981, had trouble remembering his best auction memory. "Boy, that's a tough one," he said, "But it probably was when Bob Mondavi and Brother Tim were involved."

The staff from St. Helena's Knickerbockers, including its owners Shannon and Christina Kelly, spent Friday outside in front of Greystone, baking pizza with their wood-fired pizza oven. By the time

they ran out of pizzas, they had served up nearly 1,300 slices. When asked why he works the Marketplace each year, Shannon responded, "We participate because of the community. We love what the wine auction does: the fact that they distribute so much money to so many different needy causes, including COPE and the Wolfe Center. These are all real special to us. We come every year and we like to do our part."

Beth Nickel, proprietress of Far Niente, said she and her husband, the late Gil Nickel, first became members of the Napa Valley Vintners in 1982, when they restored and moved into Far Niente. Each year since then, Nickel said, the winery has been a part of Auction Napa Valley. "This is a tremendous way for the Napa Valley to give back to the community, which supports so many worthwhile charities, which have benefited from the vintners," she said. In 2011, Far Niente offered a barrel lot of their 2009 cabernet sauvignon and Nickel said they offer live lots every other year. "Last year, we had a fabulous jet trip to New York City for three couples, with fabulous lifestyle, hotels and a performance with Joshua Bell at Lincoln Center," she said. The winners were two couples from the Napa Valley and one couple from Connecticut. She added the partners of Far Niente went and had a great time. "It was a tremendous weekend," she said.

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Besides the Nickels, Beth said the vintners involved in the early auctions were the Mondavis, the Chappellets, Duckhorns and the Trefethens. "The Napa Valley Vintners are a real brotherly organization, all are welcome," she said. "It's a warm-hearted, generous bunch of people. The auction benefits our community. Napa Valley, it turned out, is really a good place to get sick, because the hospitals and health care facilities are really well funded thanks to this auction."

St. Helenan Chuck McMinn can attest to how open and welcoming those involved in the Auction Napa Valley are. He was pouring both his sauvignon blanc and cabernet sauvignon from Vineyard 29 at the Marketplace Friday and said he's been involved in Auction Napa Valley since 1999. Why does he do it? "Because I think it's a great way to give back to the community. I mean, this day is all about raising money to support children's services, health care and housing in the Napa Valley."

McMinn's first experience with Auction Napa Valley was before he was a vintner, when he was a guest of Dan Lynch, who was an investor in one of McMinn's high-tech companies. At the time, McMinn had just put a wine cellar in his house and it was after one of his companies went public. He attended the auction because Lynch told him, "I'll help you fill up the wine cellar."

"Back in the 1990s, there was a tradition where the vintners would hijack a lot for auction. The lot would say, 'Dinner for two and one bottle of wine.' And they (the NVV organizers) would go to the proprietor and ask, 'Would you throw a party for everyone who paid \$1,000 for your lot?' In 1999, that was the Pine Ridge lot and 125 vintners bid \$1,000 apiece," McMinn said. Lynch told the vintners if they would each bring a magnum of wine to the party, he would get McMinn to match the \$125,000 bid. McMinn said he did and "immediately, I had 125 signed magnums from almost every vintner in the Napa Valley in my wine cellar."

"It's a great example of how open and welcoming this community is. This was my first wine auction, my first deal and they were so welcoming to this newbie from the Silicon Valley," he added.

Nickel said in the beginning, the wine auction was a gathering under a relatively small tent with auditorium seating, not seating around tables as it is today. Also, the auction included only wine lots, "not the lifestyle packages that it has morphed into," she said. "It has expanded and snowballed and has become a really fabulous four-day event." The first auction included a few hundred people, instead of almost 1,000 who attended Saturday's event. That auction, in 1981, also was famously and beastly hot, according to Nickel. It was so hot, auctioneer Michael Broadbent spent part of the afternoon with his feet in a cold bucket of water and ice.

Nickel added it seems the climate in the United States has changed a bit. "We no longer have the extreme heat spells in June as we once had. Now this year, of course, we're working at the opposite end of the spectrum with this extreme chill." On Friday she added, "We're hoping for a little sunshine tomorrow."

Anne Vawter, winemaker for Oakville Ranch, Ziata, Peterman Vineyards and Red Mare Wines, said she has been coming to the Barrel Auction and Marketplace since 2004. "It's a large event, it is fun with amazing purveyors of food here. Where else are you gonna have the French Laundry?" she asked. "All the hot restaurants all over the valley are here. And all the wines you want to taste are here." She added the barrel auction wines, all cabernet sauvignons from the 2009 vintage, are about to be bottled. "It's a really good way to get a perspective on the vintage, especially for the reds. You can really see what's going on with the wine," she said.

What does Vawter think about the 2009 vintages?

"I think they're lovely, actually," she said. "What I like about the 2009 vintage right now is everything is in a beautiful place. The acids are a little bit higher in 2009, across the board. I feel the pendulum is swinging back a little bit and we're getting really well-balanced, beautiful wines."

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Posted in **Business** on *Thursday, June 9, 2011 12:00 am* Updated: *10:04 pm*. | Tags: **Auction Napa Valley**

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