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Wine auction sets records at 25th anniversary celebration

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With proceeds topping the \$10 million mark over the weekend, Auction Napa Valley remains one of the world's top wine-themed charity fundraising efforts.

Members of the sponsoring Napa Valley Vintners breathed a collective sigh of relief at the close of the four-hour-plus auction Saturday night, realizing their efforts to reinvigorate this landmark affair on its silver anniversary had paid off.

Star power, sex appeal and exceptional lots of rare wine, lavish parties and exotic trips combined to bring proceeds at the 25th annual wine auction to \$10.5 million. This brings the Napa Valley event within striking distance of the Naples Winter Wine Festival which, earlier this year, raised \$11.1 million for charitable organizations in the Florida community.



Kent Hanson

"Knowing that this was a year of big, and often controversial, changes, we were fully prepared to end the night announcing a very conservative number," said Dan Duckhorn, co-chair of Auction Napa Valley 25. "To have actually exceeded our high water mark seems simultaneously inconceivable and totally appropriate. When we held the first Auction in '81 we were amazed by the outpouring of support from our guests. Year 25 marked a new beginning, and here we are again, completely overwhelmed by the generosity of the bidders at this very special event."

"Raising this level of money for our beneficiaries is an obvious success and we are thrilled," added Joel Aiken, president of the NVV's board of directors. "But perhaps even more exciting for so many of us is that our vision of a revitalized event was so well received. I mean, we raised a lot of money here tonight -- but we also had a heck of a lot of fun."

While there were many new features this year, including an e-auction and community festival, it was the relatively streamlined live auction that brought in most of the revenue -- more than \$8 million.

Talk show host Jay Leno warmed up 315 bidders, a like number of guests, as well as vintners and media representatives with a half-hour's worth of one-liners, jokes and quips before auctioning a custom-made cork jacket off wine legend Robert Mondavi's back at the start of Saturday night's affair.

Obviously enjoying himself, Leno stuck around to assist auctioneers Ursula Hermacinski and Fritz Hatton drum up bids for close to one-third of the auction's 58 mega-lots. He got \$60,000 for two pairs of tickets to his own late night talk show.

Leno helped push bids for the landmark Robert and Peter Mondavi wine collaboration over the \$400,000 mark when he told the crowd: "The biggest lot of the night should be for the wine of these two gentlemen." Woodside's Joy Craft obviously agreed, offering the top bid of \$401,000 for 60 magnums of wine produced as a result of the brothers' new alliance, along with a couple of meals with family members.

Leno welcomed actress Teri Hatcher to the stage to add sex appeal to the Frank Family Vineyards lot, a Hollywood-themed offering that included dinner in Beverly Hills with Hatcher and a walk-on part on "Desperate Housewives," her hit ABC series. It also included five double magnums of cabernet sauvignon. Bidding was so spirited for this lot that vintner Rich Frank and Hatcher agreed to provide it for both top bidder and underbidder, Saratoga's Jody and Stratton Sclavos (\$300,000) and Tatiana Copeland (\$280,000), who, with husband Gerret, owns Bouchaine Vineyards.

Another star of both silver and TV screens, Jerry O'Connell hopped onto the stage in an effort to pump up bids for the lot offered by Chappellet Winery & Vineyard. The star of "Crossing Jordan" insisted the winning bidder would be "the pimp of Napa" by driving off in a yet-to-be-released silver Cadillac STS-V. Additionally, top bidder got to take home the sole remaining five liter bottle of '69 cabernet sauvignon, a wine that set bidding records at the first wine auction in 1981. A bidding war between vintner Koerner Rombauer and Henry Brown, of Thousand Oaks, was eventually won by Brown at \$300,000.

Leno also had fun with the lot provided by former Indy car driver Randy Lewis, of Lewis Cellars, Shafer Vineyards and Darioush. While the lot contained a quartet of double magnums of cabernet sauvignon from each vintner's cellar, it included racing school for eight at Infineon Raceway. "Here's your chance to prove your ass will fit in a Formula One (race) car," Leno directed at potential bidders.

A free-spending affair

Bidders at this year's auction spent money like they did during the dot-com boom. More than half the lots went for more than \$100,000. Total proceeds are listed at \$10,539,050. Signaling what was to come, Lot One in the auction catalog -- 14 hand-painted imperials of cabernet sauvignon purchased by Wine Spectator publisher

Marvin Shanken at the first auction and donated back for the silver anniversary event -- got a top bid of \$235,000, which was \$15,000 more than the top lot went for at last year's auction.

One world record was broken as well. John and Tamra Gorman, of Austin, Texas, shattered the auction's record single lot bid of half a million dollars (for a six liter bottle of Screaming Eagle cabernet) when they ponied up \$650,000 for four three-liter bottles of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and a blend of the two from Colgin Cellars.

Citing "a special relationship" with vintner Ann Colgin and partner Joe Wender, the Austin, Texas, couple is frequently listed among the top bidders at the Napa auction. Gorman said the redesigned local auction "was apt to set a new record and we were very lucky to be the ones who set it."

A wine lover in a family not familiar with wine culture, Woodside's Joy Craft emerged victorious in a bidding war for the final lot of the night. She paid \$550,000 for the privilege of allowing five couples to raid the cellars of five vintners -- Cakebread, Chateau Montelena, Joseph Phelps, Schramsberg and Silver Oak -- to take home five cases of wine from each vintner.

The Colgin lot, the five cellar raid and the Mondavi brothers' lot, respectively, were the top three lots at Saturday night's auction.

Other top lots that brought at least \$200,000 each were:

* A trio of single vineyard cabernet-based blends in three liter bottles housed in a custom-forged strongbox from BOND, a second brand from the founder of Harlan Estate. Hong Kong businessman and auction frequenter M.K. Koo was top bidder at \$400,000.

* A trio of cabernet-based blends in three liter bottles from Bill Harlan's Harlan Estate, plus a celebratory meal at the winery in Oakville. This lot also went for \$400,000, with another Texas wine collector, Larry Durham, of Austin, ending up top bidder.

* A dinner for 20 at The French Laundry, two nights accommodations in the valley for 10 couples and 20 bottles of 2001 Quintessa also saw spirited bidding. Fred Carl, CEO of Viking Range and a resident of Greenwood, Miss., paid \$400,000 for this lot.

* Chappellet Winery & Vineyard, \$300,000 for the wine, Cadillac and an all expenses paid trip to Yellowstone Club in Montana; top bidder was Henry Brown of Thousand Oaks.

*** Frank Family Vineyards, \$300,000 for wine and the Hollywood dinner with Teri Hatcher, plus "Desperate Housewives" walk-on; top bidder was Jody and Stratton Sclavos of Saratoga.**

*** Frank Family Vineyards, \$280,000 for duplicate lot; won by Bouchaine Vineyards' owners Tatiana and Gerret Copeland.**

* 25 cases of wine from each of the Auction Napa Valley chairs, including next year's Cakebread family, plus a 27 liter bottle blended from wine from each cellar; Peter Chow, of Rutherford, paid \$260,000.

* 14 handpainted imperials from Wine Spectator publisher Marvin Shanken, purchased by Bay Area businessman John Thompson.

* A barrel of 2003 Rutherford cabernet sauvignon from Staglin Family Vineyards; ten bidders paid \$20,000 for a case and one bidder paid \$21,000 for a single case of this wine at the barrel auction on Friday afternoon. Bid totals were \$221,000.

* A six liter bottle of Eisele Vineyard cabernet sauvignon from Araujo Estate Wines and dinner for 10 drew a top bid of \$220,000 from David Doyle, of Irvine.

* A vertical collection of Spottswoode cabernet sauvignon, mostly in magnums, through the 2006 harvest, cost auction regular B.A. Adams, of Morgan City, La., \$200,000.

* Also in the Hollywood theme, the Niebaum-Coppola auction lot featured a visit to the sound stage of director Sofia Coppola's new film about Marie Antoinette, starring Kirsten Dunst. That means a trip to Paris for two couples, a five night stay at the Coppola family Paris apartment, dinner in actor Gerard Depardieu's La Fontaine Gaillon restaurant and a night at the Paris Opera. Included as well was a case of 1980 Rubicon, along with 6 magnums of '95 Rubicon and a trio of double magnums from the prized 2001 vintage. Vintner Ann Colgin paid \$200,000 for this lot.

* The Robert Mondavi Winery lot featured accommodations for five couples, a private dinner at the home of Bob and Margrit Mondavi, a wine reception and vineyard picnic hosted by the Mondavis and front row seats to one of this season's Mondavi Summer Music Festival concerts. The lot included reserve cabernet sauvignon from '86, '87, '91, '95 and '01 harvests in 750 ml bottles as well as magnums and double magnums. Teri and Ron Kuhn, owners of Pillar Rock Vineyard, were top bidders at \$200,000.