

Vinophiles and VIPs at Napa Valley's 25th annual wine auction

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ST. HELENA, Calif. - High-flying vinophiles looking to meet one of TV's "Desperate Housewives" - or maybe just desperate for good house wines - descended on the Napa Valley this weekend for the 25th running of the region's famous charity auction.

Among the auction items was one loaded with sentimental value - a barrel of wine made by once-estranged brothers Robert and Peter Mondavi that was their first joint effort since 1965.

And for those looking to catch a cab to Hollywood there was an offering from Frank Family Vineyards that included wine, dinner in Beverly Hills with winery officials and actress Teri Hatcher, and a walk-on part in "Desperate Housewives," the hit ABC show in which she co-stars.

The event, which has raised more than \$52 million for local health care and other causes since it began in 1981, got a makeover this year.

Saturday's main auction, which had been running as long as six sweltering hours, was shortened and moved from afternoon to evening. Meanwhile, ticket prices were tripled, to \$7,500 per couple, and talk show host Jay Leno was hired to juice up the crowd.

For years, the Napa auction, renamed this year to Auction Napa Valley, reigned among wine charity events. But recently, the Naples Winter Wine Festival in Florida has been doing better, bringing in more than \$11 million this year.

Last year, Napa brought in \$5.3 million, down about a million from the year before and well below the high point of \$9.5 million in 2000.

Napa vintners say they're not trying to compete with Naples, which is a different type of event.

The Napa auction, which raises money for regional health care, housing and other causes, was largely the idea of Robert Mondavi, who founded his namesake company after the bitter split with his brother 40 years ago. Peter Mondavi stayed on as head of the family's Charles Krug Winery.

Over the years, the families reconciled and after the Robert Mondavi Corp. was sold to Constellation Brands last year, the brothers and their children decided to join forces once again.

On Friday, the brothers sat in chairs beneath a symbolic painting of two vines surrounding a dove as area residents checked out the auction lots by way of special, one-day tickets that went for \$75 to people who live in Napa County.

Some got a glimpse of Hatcher, who cheerfully announced, "I'm one of the auction items!"

But does Hatcher think her character, the charmingly klutzy Susan, would enjoy the event?

"Susan would embarrassingly enjoy herself here, I'm sure," Hatcher said. "Hopefully, I won't trip over barrels while I'm walking around."

