

Auction Napa Valley kicks off with Pride

By Jack Heeger, Register Staff Writer

If the results of the opening day of Auction Napa Valley are any indication, 2006 should be another banner year. More than 3,000 people jammed the grounds of Trinchero Family Estate in St. Helena Friday for Pride in Season, the food and wine festival that also includes an e-auction and barrel auction. It was the second year out of the auction's 26-years the festival was held, and tickets to it were sold to the public at \$200 each, separate from the complete \$7,500 full-auction package. About 2,000 folks took advantage of the offer and about three-quarters of them were Napa County folks who came in at half-price under the Napa Valley Vintners' Napa Neighbor program. Bidding on the e-auction was spirited. Anyone anywhere in the world could bid since it was conducted online for the first time this year, and the total surpassed last year's "silent" auction even before the doors opened at 10:30 a.m. By the time the e-auction closed at 2:45 p.m., the unofficial total was more than \$275,000, and that was expected to swell after the results were officially counted. Last year's total was \$179,000. Bidding on the barrel auction, featuring lots of 10 cases each of wines specially created for Auction Napa Valley, also began on Friday and continue today, ending an hour after the close of the live auction.

Chairman is hopeful

Auction chairman Jack Cakebread said prior to the opening of Friday's festivities that last year's event -- a \$10.5 million success -- was special in that it celebrated the auction's 25th anniversary. "I hope we can come close to that this year," he said. At the end of the day, with the preliminary e-auction totals in, he could sit back and smile a bit. Since its inception, Auction Napa Valley has raised \$61.5 million for organizations in Napa Valley related to health, youth activities and farmworker housing and other causes. Pride in Season consisted of nearly 50 Napa Valley restaurants and specialty food shops offering their signature dishes, along with about 60 wineries pouring current releases. Because the temperature hovered in the mid-80s, many poured white wines appreciated by attendees. Every type of food was offered, from cold soups and salads to mini sandwiches and barbecued ribs, plus rich desserts -- no one left hungry. Not surprisingly, there was a constant crowd around the French Laundry's station to taste the restaurant's famed cornet with salmon tartare. It was a rare opportunity for most to sample the fare of Thomas Keller's world-acclaimed restaurant.

Celebrity sighting

The barrel auction and e-auction were held inside a giant storage building, along with a display of the live auction lots, and it turned out to be a place for celebrity sightings. Actress Geena Davis, star of "Commander in Chief," greeted fans near the Frank Family Vineyards live auction lot, which includes a walk-on role in a soon-to-be-filmed TV featured movie based on the TV show. Wine enthusiasts had a special treat when Robert and Peter Mondavi sat together in front of the Mondavi Family lot of 60 etched and signed magnums of a special blend of cabernet sauvignon from Robert's To-Kalon Vineyard and Peter's Yountville vineyard, along with a dinner for 16 with the brothers next year. Another live auction lot that attracted attention was that of St. Supery Vineyards, featuring two young women portraying Lucy and Ethel from the famous "I Love Lucy" grape-stomping scene, depicting the make-your-own-barrel experience offered. Jessica Christensen and Alicia Huddleston, both of Napa, posed happily for photographers while stomping on a vat of grapes.

A face familiar to Napa Valley wine enthusiasts who attend the Silver Oak release parties was artist Thomas Arvid, who created a special painting for the auction featuring bottles from Cakebread Cellars, Joseph Phelps Vineyard, Schramsberg Vineyards, Silver Oak Cellars and ZD Wines. He painted a one-of-a-kind piece of art on a Cakebread 3-liter bottle as spectators gathered around. Although he has worked with many of the valley's top vintners, he was awestruck by the major industry names that surrounded him, commenting, "On my left side is a table full of Screaming Eagle, and on my right are the Mondavis."

Pride in Season

Although the auctions are what brings in the money for the auction's beneficiaries, it was the Pride in Season festival that had many folks talking. Dana and Dynie Sanderson of Napa came to "have fun. We see lots of old friends -- it's like old home week," Dana said. Dynie added, "This allows a lot of locals to participate, and it's nice to see so many others here." Dustin Mowe, who manages the Napa office of Portocork America, supplier of corks to many local wineries, came last year with his wife Renee, and called Pride in Season "the best event around." Agreeing with Mowe was Jerry Alexander of Calistoga who moved to Napa Valley in 1954, and has a vineyard on Silverado Trail. He has been coming to the auction for years, but for his guest from Thailand, it was the first time. "I love it," she said, and Alexander added, "I'm so impressed that every year they make it better."

Mark and Nancy Anderson moved to St. Helena last summer and are newcomers to the event. Nancy looked at the tables of delectables around her and said, "It's not humanly possible to taste everything," and added, "This is a real down-home feeling." Mark agreed, "This is great that they've opened the doors for locals." One of the features of the festival was a ring toss. For \$20, folks had three tries to toss a ring over a wine bottle, and if they were successful, they won the bottle. When Francis Connelly, of St. Helena, successfully ringed one, he proudly announced, "I won a Sullivan," a bottle from Sullivan Vineyards. His wife, Shannon, said she won a magnum of Beaulieu Vineyards' Georges de Latour last year, but "no luck this year."

Auction action

Inside the building, e-auction and barrel auction watchers eyed the boards showing the current status of each lot. Tom Evans of Los Gatos, was watching the e-auction board to "protect" his bids. He has attended the last six or seven years, "but I never get tired of it." It was Brenda Cockerell's third year. Cockerell, from Dallas, bid on one lot and watched the e-auction results. "This event has a lot of energy," she said. "You can feel it." Gary Ochwat and Ricardo Cajulis of Calistoga bid on two barrel lots. "We've done the barrel auction five years now, and we've been successful the last four," Ochwat said. "The first year we were newbies and didn't get it, but we caught on to how it's done."



FRIDAY MAY 31, 2005 NAPA, CA. - Geena Davis makes an appearance at the Frank Family Vineyard lot during the Napa Valley Auction and Festival at the Trinchero Estates in St. Helena on Friday. Shari Staglin, of Staglin Vineyards, is at left. Greg Hess/Register