

Wine auction nets \$8.4 million

By Pierce Carson Register Staff Writer



Actress Geena Davis, right, talks with Rich Frank of Frank Family Vineyards while tasting his 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon Winston Hill Vineyard wine during a recent auction and festival in St. Helena, Calif.

Associated Press Photo

Save for one mind-blowing, record-breaking bid, the 26th edition of Auction Napa Valley proved to be a relatively uneventful affair. Even with rather subdued bidding by some 400 bidders and guests, the country's best known wine auction raised \$8.4 million Saturday for local health care, youth endeavors and housing programs. Held in a sweltering tent on the fairway at Meadowood Resort, the well-attended wine auction failed to match the \$10.5 million in proceeds at last year's silver anniversary celebration. Auction officials, however, said before the event they'd be happy if this year's take only registered half of the 25th anniversary tally. "We didn't expect to beat last year," said auction co-chair Jack Cakebread after the final gavel rang down on four hours of less-than-spirited bidding. "This event helps people -- it's not a contest. The (Napa Valley) Vintners launched this auction after asking: 'How can we help people?' The auction is not a marketing ploy. The vintners work on this all year long because they want to help people in our community. 'I'm proud our family could be part of this,'" added Cakebread, who along with others members of his family, co-chaired Auction Napa Valley 2006.

Seven-figure bidding

The main event, the live auction, raises the most for local beneficiaries. Saturday night's \$7.2 million total got a significant boost from a record single bid of \$1.05 million by Woodside's Joy Craft for a deluxe excursion to Paris, Champagne and Bordeaux guided by vintners Shari and Garen Staglin, of Staglin Family Vineyards. Craft beat out neighbor Don Thompson

for the lot that drew considerable interest and staggering bids eventually topping the million dollar mark. After flying business class to Paris, Craft and three friends get tours and tastings at renowned Champagne houses and Bordeaux chateaus, and dine at some of the top restaurants and wine estates in France's wine regions. The trip concludes in New York City at a dinner hosted by one of the city's best known chefs and restaurateurs, Daniel Boulud. The record lot also includes three magnums, one double magnum and an imperial of the new Staglin Family Vineyard Meritage wine blended by France-born winemaker Luc Morlet. Craft runs an education foundation in South Carolina named Web-Craft after her grandmother and grandfather, respectively. She characterized her life story as going from rags to riches after growing up in a farming family in Belton, S.C.

"It's my greatest privilege," Craft humbly remarked after registering the winning million-dollar-plus bid. "My entire life I've been inspired by philanthropy. It's who I am. It's what I do. I grew up in a farming family. It's part of my DNA coming here and being with the vines and the dirt. If I can be an example to others, great." "This was the number one lot of all time -- anywhere," said a beaming Garen Staglin after reflecting on what had taken place with his lot. "Our goal was to create the ultimate experience for bidders of great generosity. Great wines for great causes - that's what Napa Valley Vintners is all about, and the Napa community benefits as a result."

Celebrities on tap

The live auction got off to a rocky start when emcee Ryan Seacrest, host of Fox Network's "American Idol," had trouble getting attendees -- who were enjoying a continuing parade of hors d'oeuvres and sommeliers pouring choice wines -- to take their seats and cease conversation in the steam-bath-like environment. "I'm into chicks -- and wine," he declared above the din. "I like women despite how I dress," he added before showing a brief "COPS"-style filmed re-enactment of how a trio of auction beneficiaries had positively affected the lives of three area residents and their families. Seacrest interviewed a few vintners and auction attendees just prior to the start of the live auction, shown on giant screens on opposite sides of the event stage. He also stuck around to nudge a few paddleholders toward higher bids and to flatter top bidders. Otherwise, the "American Idol" emcee seemed to do very little to earn his reported \$150,000 appearance fee.

Also revving up the crowd was Oscar-winning actress Geena Davis, here as part of the Frank Family Vineyards auction lot including both wine and a walk-on role in an upcoming made-for-TV movie based on ABC-TV's canceled series, "Commander in Chief," she stars in as the first woman president to occupy the White House. "People have come up to me over the past two days and said how much they liked the show," Davis declared as she joined hard-working auctioneers Ursula Hermacinski and Fritz Hatton on stage. "Now we'll see just how much," she added as she suggested bidding start at \$100,000. With bids going nowhere, Davis, wearing an ear-to-ear grin, told the crowd: "I am the fake president of the United States. Now is the time for you to come to the aid of your country." A bid of \$200,000 quickly followed. "I will not accept any less than what Teri Hatcher got last year," Davis continued, referencing last year's Frank Family Vineyards lot that included a walk-on role on Hatcher's popular "Desperate Housewives" nighttime soap opera. That prompted vintner Koerner Rombauer to bid \$300,000 for the lot, and then agree to add on another \$5,000 to make Davis happy.

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But Davis couldn't tempt veteran auction bidder M.K. Koo, of Hong Kong, to spend another \$100,000 on the cult cabernet lot from Screaming Eagle that would have included a Davis-hosted Hollywood dinner. "I want to keep things simple -- only the wine will be fine," Koo said as Screaming Eagle's new owner Charles Banks came to congratulate him on the \$460,000 bid.

That's how a lot of bidding proceeded Saturday night, with auctioneers begging bidders to spend more on the 60 lots on the block. "It's like pulling teeth," commented one attendee. Whether triggered by uncertain economic times, wavering Wall Street or the brow-mopping auction environment, bidders overall sat on the hands -- and their paddles -- Saturday night. Several longtime auction attendees said they were surprised by the "subdued bidding." Although Seacrest had no trouble getting \$35,000 for four backstage passes to next season's "American Idol" show, Hermacinski was shocked by the dearth of bids for a package from the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association including meals and accommodations for a wine celebration next spring, and double magnums of cabernet from the 11 members. "You stole it," Hermacinski told Danville's Gregory Newman who made the winning bid of \$35,000. Indicative of the cut-rate tone Saturday night, a barrel of cabernet sauvignon blended from grapes grown by the Peter and Robert Mondavi families went for less than a third of what the initial barrel got last year. St. Helena's Peter

Chow paid \$130,000 for lunch with the two families and 60 magnums of the one-of-a-kind 2005 cabernet blend. The auction may have hit an all-time low in bid-begging when auctioneer Fritz Hatton -- playing off a "Let's Make A Deal"-style bid scheme that included a donkey as zonk prize -- got five paddleholders to pony up \$20,000 each "to see me make an ass of myself."

The big lots

In addition to the record-breaking bid, several other special events and new car packages were among the top lots this year. However, most of the 2006 auction's top bids were for hard-to-come-by wine in oversized bottles. Koo, chairman of Nam Tai Electronics, picked up the first complete vertical of Screaming Eagle magnums ever sold, from the '92 debut release through the current 2004 vintage, for a \$460,000 bid. For a winning

\$200,000 bid, Koo also took home a nine-liter bottle of Dalla Valle 2002 Maya and an invitation to dinner with vintner Naoko Dalla Valle. He was also top bidder at \$180,000 on a nine liter bottle of Joseph Phelps 2002 Insignia along with a case of the same wine in 750 ml bottles. In addition to picking up the walk-on part in Geena Davis' new TV film, vintner Koerner Rombauer was also high bidder on a couple more top lots. He paid \$300,000 for a 2006 street model of the Le Mans Corvette Z06 filled with wine from Cakebread Cellars and lessons on how to drive it from the Bondurant School of High Performance Driving in Phoenix.

Rombauer was high bidder as well for the Robert Mondavi Winery lot that includes a 40-year retrospective of Mondavi cabernet sauvignon and a trip to Italy to the birthplace of Mondavi's parents, Sassoferrato in the Marche region. Including visits to Tuscany and Assisi, the trip to Europe will be led by Margrit Biever Mondavi.

"I bought this lot because I love Bob Mondavi," Rombauer declared. "If it wasn't for him, a lot of us wouldn't be here."

Saratoga's Stratton Sclavos ponied up \$380,000 for a quartet of double magnums of Colgin Cellars Tychson Hill Vineyard cabernet sauvignon, while auction newcomer David Reis, of Rye, N.Y., plunked down \$340,000 for a 10 magnum vertical of Harlan Estate cabernet blend, 1993-2002. Montecito's Larry Durham was top bidder at \$200,000 for a joint Duckhorn and Paraduxx lot that includes a Napa Valley stay for six, with accommodations, tastings and meals, plus 25 magnums of merlot and cabernet from Duckhorn and the unique blend of zinfandel, cabernet and merlot from Paraduxx.

Vintner Jess Jackson picked up a 6 liter and 750 ml mix of wines from Arietta, plus dinner for eight at the Arietta estate, for \$180,000.

Final tallies While the live auction took in a total of \$7.26 million, the popular simultaneous barrel auction raised another \$815,750. The relatively new e-auction this year brought in \$310,000. Final auction totals released by the sponsoring Napa Valley Vintners Sunday showed all auction events this year raised \$8.4 million

"I can't thank the volunteers enough," co-chair Jack Cakebread said as auction attendees elbowed their way onto a cooking demo platform where chefs from around the country served up small plates of food following the event. "The Napa Valley Vintners staff worked their butts off on this thing. And Ursula and Fritz did a wonderful job. And I want to thank my family for the time they put in, too."