

Auction Napa Valley Has a Legendary Day

By W. Blake Gray | Posted Monday, 08-Jun-2015



© Jason Tinacci | *I Am Legend: the Grammy-winning R&B artist serenades the crowd at Auction Napa Valley.*

Dinner with the stars, fabulous trips abroad and even some wine – it must be Auction Napa Valley time again.

John Legend's music is like Napa Valley Cabernet: a lot of people like it, even more so when it's something they can have but most people cannot.

So when Legend unexpectedly took the stage Saturday at Auction Napa Valley to play his romantic single "All of Me", the small crowd of wealthy people – who all paid a minimum of \$1700 to attend – went crazy. And then they spent a near-crazy amount of money.

[Napa's](#) annual charity auction brought in \$15.8 million over the weekend, actually down from the record \$18.7 million it raised in 2014. But the biggest numbers for individual lots dwarfed last year. A single bottle of wine – albeit a 12-liter Balthazar of 2012 [Screaming Eagle](#) – raised \$500,000. A luxury trip to Europe set an all-time record at \$2.4 million. But nine-time Grammy Award winner Legend played the biggest number of all.

Rick Jones, a retired grocery store executive who founded Jones Family Vineyards in Calistoga in 1996, paid \$850,000 for Lot No. 31, "A Truly Legendary Evening". The lot, donated by Raymond Vineyards, includes dinner for 30 at the home of Raymond owner Jean-Charles Boisset with a private dinner performance by Legend on Boisset's personal piano.

"Most of my concerts are for big crowds. It's nice to do it for a small group," Legend told Wine Searcher. "When it's a small little thing, I like to do 30 or 40 minutes. I'll pick my set list as I go."

It turns out that Legend, who added to his awards pile this year with an Oscar for the song "Glory" from the film "Selma", is not only a wine lover but a fledgling vintner. He and Raymond Vineyards collaborated to produce 6000 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay under the name "LVE."

"I know that my music and my wine go really well together," Legend said. "Jean-Charles and the Raymond Vineyards team are very good partners. We wanted to make the wine to reflect my personal taste."

The LVE wine will be released in the fall, but the auction attendees got to be the first to taste it.

"We said, the best way to release it is at the auction," Boisset told Wine Searcher. "John's very committed to Napa Valley. We really wanted to make something very exclusive."

Now \$850,000 is a lot of money, and it's the biggest check any one person wrote for one lot Saturday, but it's not the most anyone has ever paid (in 2007, a Staglin Family Vineyard lot went for \$1.1m) and it's not even close to the most money raised Saturday by a single lot.



© Bob McClenahan | *Winning bidders are showered with confetti.*

Opus One offered a two-week, first-class visit to 11 top wineries in France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Portugal, along with a 35-year vertical of magnums of [Opus One](#). It sold for \$800,000 – to three different people. The \$2.4m total is a new record for an amount raised by a single lot.

"We were thrilled that the lot hammered at 800,000," Opus One CEO David Pearson told Wine Searcher. "A couple came up to us about 20 minutes later and asked if we would double it. They had been at \$750,000. We said we would check into it. We did have that many magnums left in our cellar, so we said yes. There was an announcement. Then about 30 minutes later, another couple came up and said the same thing. I was really, really happy, but we won't be doing this again in six months. Maybe ever."

Pearson was honorary auction chairman this year, so he got to meet some of the beneficiaries of the big bucks. Auction Napa Valley has periodically taken criticism for being a playground for the 1 percent, but it has raised \$145 million for Napa County charities since the first auction in 1981.

"I talked with a resource center in American Canyon," Pearson said. "A woman related to me that, the day after the earthquake last year, she received a quick check for \$5000 from the [Napa Valley] Vintners. She said she could keep her doors open, could give out plates of food. She could give out the basic essentials to people who needed them. The impact of the auction is so great on the community. I hope the generosity outshines the idea that it's a bunch of rich people having a party."

That said, what a party! The 850 people in the tent, guests and hosts alike, ate terrific food – a lavender-infused, palate-cleansing drink from Morimoto Napa was a hit – drank special bottles of wine that the vintners had bought (Shafer Vineyards had older magnums of its [Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon](#)), and enjoyed perfect weather at beautiful Meadowood.

"A lot of times, I do the greetings when people arrive," Doug Shafer told Wine Searcher. "People were happy to be here. The sun's out, let's spend some money for a great cause."