

Wine Spectator

With Star Power, Great Wines and a Worthy Cause, Auction Napa Valley Raises \$15.8 Million

The nation's highest-earning charity wine auction set a new record for a single lot during a weekend of celebration

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Photo by: Jason Tinacci for Napa Valley Vintners

Jean-Charles Boisset, John Legend and Fritz Hatton (left to right) work the crowd at Auction Napa Valley.

The crowd at Saturday's Auction Napa Valley knew they were in for a day of great wine, delicious food and feverish bidding to raise money for charity. They did not expect to be serenaded by a Grammy-winning recording artist. John Legend, who won an Oscar for his song "Glory" from the film *Selma* at this year's Academy Awards, took the auction stage to perform "All of Me" for the crowd, wooing them to bid high on a wine lot he helped create.

It was just further proof of the star power of America's top charity wine auction. The four-day event by Napa Valley Vintners (NVV), now in its 35th year, raised \$15.8 million for local nonprofits focused on community health and children's education. The live bidding on June 6 pulled in \$13.3 million with a tempting selection of lots of rare wine and luxury experiences.

While the total is lower than **last year's record-breaking \$18.7 million** and the \$16.9 million total from 2013, it still makes this the nation's top charity wine sale, surpassing **the \$12.3 million raised by the Naples Winter Wine Festival earlier this year**. Since 1981, NVV has given more than \$145 million to charities.

"I love to help the children," said vintner Mary Miner of Oakville Ranch Vineyards, who was the winning bidder on three lots and is regularly one of the most generous contributors at the auction. Living in Napa, Miner said she personally knows locals who need and utilize the services the auction funds. "It's just what I like to do, and how I like to help," she said.

Legend was there because he had partnered with **Raymond Vineyards** for what proved to be the top individual lot of the evening: dinner and a private concert for 30 at the home of Raymond proprietor Jean-Charles Boisset and his wife, Gina Gallo, (who live in the home that once belonged to the legendary Robert Mondavi). The lot included signed bottles of the inaugural Legend Vineyard Exclusives, a new collaboration between Legend and Raymond. A group of local vintners made the winning bid of \$850,000.



Jason Tinacci

Winning bidders celebrate.

Another lot, tripled so that three high bidders could win, was the auction's top-grossing lot of all time, selling for a combined \$2.4 million. Opus One, the auction's honorary chair, offered a vertical of their wine in magnums, 35 wines in all, and a two-week trip to France, with visits to wineries, including Bordeaux's Château Mouton-Rothschild, Châteauneuf-du-Pape's Château de Beaucastel and Champagne's Pol Roger. Three winning bids came in at \$800,000 each. Bidding was aggressive at first for the lot, then slowed until auctioneer Fritz Hatton told the crowd, "I will fake a heart attack [if I don't get] get another bid." Paddles started flying up again.

Back in 1981, at the first-ever auction, **Opus One** was a brand-new venture between Robert Mondavi and Baron Philippe de Rothschild of Mouton-Rothschild. **They sold a case of their new wine for a then-astonishing \$24,000.** This year, another lot with a 35-year vertical, paired with a trip to Dubai, sold for \$240,000. During the Fund-a-Need lot, a \$300,000 gift from the children of **the late Baroness Philippine de Rothschild** was announced, as well as another \$300,000 from Constellation Brands, now in partnership at Opus One.

A Packed Weekend

The 35th annual auction weekend was a four-day affair. The main event is the live auction at Meadowood Resort, but there are also parties, vintner-hosted dinners, open houses, an online auction and the Napa Valley Barrel Auction.

This year's barrel auction took place at **Hall's St. Helena winery**, where 2,000 guests sampled from hundreds of producers and dozens of restaurants under tents on the grounds. It was notably festive, with a Michael Jackson impersonator, live music, complimentary chair massages and an orchestra and choral flash mob performing "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

Inside the winery, 120 vintners poured samples of the barrel-auction offerings. The top 10 bidders on each lot won a case of wine, and were able to both bid and keep track of bids on a mobile app. A record \$1.9 million was raised through the sale of these wine futures. When the online e-auction closed, it netted a new record of \$612,500.



Bob McClenahan

John Legend plays for the crowd.

But the big event is Saturday's live auction at Meadowood, and before bidding began, more than 850 attendees mingled and enjoyed a walk-around lunch prepared by local chef Michael Chiarello in a marketplace atmosphere—guests browsed wooden stalls where they could sample dishes like baguette sandwiches, fried chicken, potato salad and snickerdoodles.

A drum line led the attendees into an enormous, air-conditioned tent. While luxury experiences have become a big part of the lots, wine is typically the star of the show. A 12-liter bottle of **Screaming Eagle** sold for \$500,000, **tying the price a similar lot went for in 2013**. All of the live lots included wine, and most included lavish meals, but as usual there were plenty of other offers to entice bidding, including cooking classes, a Navy-SEAL immersion experience, yacht trips, opera tickets and shopping excursions. Various lots offered travel to Switzerland, Argentina, Uruguay, Hong Kong, Italy, Alaska and Vancouver. One lot included a Mini Cooper convertible.

The big draws are the one-of-a-kind excursions vintners are able to offer. Hall offered a trip to Austria for a private tour of the Riedel glass facility, which sold for \$120,000, while a **Charles Krug**—sponsored trip to Las Vegas including shows and a NASCAR driving experience went for \$50,000. **Lokoya** offered VIP tickets to the Kentucky Derby for \$200,000. **Frank Family Vineyards** put together a trip for two to the Emmy Awards, including clothing and styling for \$180,000.

There were some clever ways for bidders to participate, including two lots that allowed for as many winning bidders as paddles that went up. More than 70 bidders pledged \$5,000 apiece to take part in a mass bike ride on the new Vine Trail, including lunch and a wine tasting, before next year's auction. The **Staglin** lot of 9-liter bottles of wine and a gala dinner drew 14 successful bids for \$25,000 apiece.

Despite all the glitz, the most emotional moment came at the end, when bidders watched a video filmed four years ago about a little girl who needed spinal surgery for spina bifida. The Napa Valley Vintners children's-health initiative helped pay for her procedure, and after the film, the now 5-year-old appeared on stage with her father to dance for a few moments, bringing the true focus of the event home.

Top 10 Live Auction Lots

Raymond Vineyards: \$850,000

Dinner for 30 at the home of Jean-Charles Boisset and Gina Gallo, including a private performance by John Legend and a collection of Legend Vineyard Exclusive memorabilia and large-format wines