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'The Descendants' Opens First Napa Valley Film Festival

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Courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures

Nicolas Ozeki's "Mamitas" takes top prize at the event that combined food, wine and film.

The Napa Valley Film Festival kicked off its inaugural year with non-stop gourmet food, fine wines and emerging filmmakers. *The Descendants*, the opening night film, was followed by an A-class gala held at the Robert Mondavi Winery on opening night, Nov. 9. The late vintner's widow **Margrit Biever Mondavi** raised a glass to the spirit of indie cinema, under a giant tent decorated with a vintage Hollywood theme. This is Napa Valley, of course, so the opening gala featured wine country's top chefs, who laid out a spread including such yummy dishes as foie gras, braised wild boar, Liberty Farm duck and seafood bounty washed down with Mondavi cabernets, pinots and Mumm champagne.

OUR EDITOR RECOMMENDS

'The Descendants' Premiere

Local vintners supported the fest and opened their mansions, barrel rooms, tasting salons and front porches to host private dinners and VIP receptions. The after-party for the film *El Camino del Vino* was hosted by **Michael**

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Mondavi at his late father's home, which is up for sale. Over the weekend, a series of intimate dinners prepared by Napa's culinary stars were held at different wineries, among them **Ken Frank** at Staglin Estate, **Michel Cornui** at Raymond Winery, **Renee Ortiz** at Cade, **Bob Hurley** at Paradigm and **Chris Aken** at Chimney Rock.

And this being the wine region, instead of plaques or statues, magnums of such Napa names as Peju, Chappellet, Sterling, Hess, Flora Spings, Jessup Cellars and more were awarded to the winners at the closing night ceremonies on Nov. 13. The Meadowood Best Narrative Feature award of \$10,000 was given to *Mamitas*, directed by **Nicolas Ozeki**, and the special jury award to **Joel Fendleman's David**. Best documentary award went to **Vikram Gandhi's Kumaré**, and special jury mention for social impact to the husband and wife team of **Adam and Jaye Fenderson** for their film, *First Generations*.

Although Napa Valley is home to pricey restaurants and wines, the festival managed to exude a small town feel, with screenings held in such creative venues as Calistoga's glider port hangar and Yountville's community center as well as a school and a barrel room. Fest-goers also enjoyed fine Napa vintages at screenings and at panel discussions.

Co-founded by **Brenda** and **Marc Lhormer**, producers of *Bottle Shock*, the four-day festival unspooled 102 films screened in four villages (or appellations) from Napa and Yountville to St. Helena and Calistoga. The film lineup included a preview of *J. Edgar* and the closing night film, *Like Crazy*.

The festival held over Veteran's Day weekend, honored veterans and vintners along with actors on Tribute Night emceed by *Access Hollywood's* **Billy Bush** (who earlier that day was learning the art of wine blending at Raymond winery). **Jeffery Wright** was acknowledged with Humanitarian Career Achievement award for his work in Sierra Leone, **Judy Greer** received the Spotlight award, and **Felicity Jones**, the Rising Star award. Forming global philanthropic partnership with Roots of Peace (an organization dedicated to turning mines to vines) the festival honored Margrit Mondavi, **Lt. Gen. John F. Campbell** and **William Murray**, president emeritus of Bank of Marin.

For some attendees it was a tough choice between a screening, a wine tasting, a blending session or a food demo at Bosch Culinary Stage set up at the Oxbow Market. There also were panels at the Buick Tweet House at Avia Hotel's lounge and late night after-after parties at eateries such as Bottega, Farmstead and Hurley's.

It was the first visit to Napa for some fest-goers such as Wright and jury member **Keith Addis**. Greer however, had been to Napa recently when she got engaged to TV producer **Dean Johnson**. "In room 212 of Hotel Bardessono," she revealed.

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