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The Other Napa Valley Wine Auction

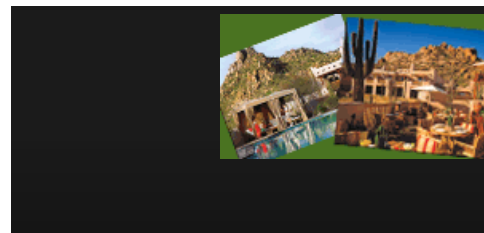
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Pre-auction mania. (Photo: James Conaway)

You've heard of the [Napa Valley wine auction](#), that stellar, expensive summer dueling among high-end wines for celebrity. But have you heard of [Premiere Napa Valley](#), a similar vinous stand-off held every winter? Probably not, unless you trade in wine and have clients willing to put down as much as, say, \$1,000 for a bottle of the valley's famous Cabernet Sauvignon.

Last weekend, attendees walked into a gorgeous, historic edifice called [Greystone](#), just north of St. Helena, a town that once housed a wine cooperative and is today the western headquarters of the [Culinary Institute of America](#). After swishing up an elaborate staircase, the oenophiles tasted barrel samples of special cuvées (blends) made just for this event and wolfed down wild mushroom risotto and grass-fed beef sliders, then trekked across to the auction hall to wave paddles in crazed semaphore, majorly lightening their wallets in the process.

You're allowed inside only if you're an insider, the ultimate wine country catch-22. Some lucky journalists, however, were permitted to bear witness to a ritual that transcends wine and, occasionally, reason. One of this year's most expensive lots — five cases of 2009 cab from [Dana Estates](#) — sold for \$70 thousand. In total, only 200 small lots of fought-over wine brought in more than \$3 million.

How, you're asking, can that outlay be justified by flinty-eyed distributors, restaurateurs, and collectors in a world beaten by economic headwinds and political uncertainty? The answer is, as in the world of fine art, limited supply — and the allure of connoisseurship. Just as a limited print from a well-known artist often brings in big money, bottles of these one-time blends from discreet vineyards attract those obsessed about owning, and tasting, rare wine. Toss in the large residual value of bragging rights and the sheer, if stunningly costly, pleasure of pulling a cork in one of these dark, lithe silhouettes, and you understand the attraction.



Greystone. (Photo: James Conaway)

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The auction's a stroke of marketing genius by the [Napa Valley Vintners Association](#), the promotional arm of winery owners that gets half its funding from two frantic hours in Greystone every year — and indirectly gives another boost to prices that may seem impossibly high until they're compared with those of a first-growth Bordeaux or the best wines of Burgundy and Champagne.



Smell-a-vision station. (Photo: James Conaway)

The auction attendees are another rare extravagance, as sensuous as the product they depend on. At [Raymond Vineyards](#), women danced overhead on steel runways, wearing feathers and little else, while guests fed from an inexhaustible raw bar and a “smell-a-vision” (decanters fitted with atomizers) sprayed the essence of wine aromas into their willing nostrils. Everywhere there was good wine, good food and the implication that, yes, it would go on forever.

James Conaway is a featured contributor on Intelligent Travel, and writes freelance for National Geographic Traveler and other publications that are devoted to travel, history, and culture.

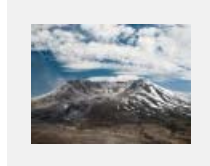
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