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Golden Woman Hangs Upside Down, Pours Napa Valley Wine

By Elin McCoy - Mar 10, 2013 9:01 PM PT

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"We're trending above Nascar and the Oscars on twitter," crows auctioneer Fritz Hatton, as he opens the 17th [Premiere Napa Valley](#) trade barrel auction with sharp bangs of his gavel.

Everyone cheers, primed to bid big on cabernet after a week of wooing by vintners at tastings and parties. The wildest event was Raymond Vineyards' "Napa Gras," where a woman in long black gloves and abbreviated gold body suit poured wine while hanging upside down.

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Aerial performer Nina Sawant pours wine for winery owner Jean-Charles Boisset from her upside down perch at Raymond Vineyards. The "Napa Gras" party on the eve of the Premiere Napa Valley barrel tasting and auction featured acrobatics by Sawant. Photographer: Moanalani Jeffrey/Raymond Vineyards via Bloomberg

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Napa's annual February event serves as a barometer of demand for expensive Napa cabs, which seems to mirror the mood on [Wall Street](#). Since this year's Feb. 23 auction hit a near-record \$3.04 million, the Dow has continued to set new highs.

The 211 one-of-a-kind, not-yet-bottled cuvees offered in five, 10, or 20-case lots represent each winery's best of the best. Most are cabernets from the 2011 vintage, so the pre-auction tastings provide a gauge to the year's overall quality and an opportunity to scout out the valley's hot new names.

The big room at the [Culinary Institute of America](#) in St. Helena is crowded with rowdy retailers, restaurateurs, importers, distributors and media from 39 states and nine countries.

Ichizo Nakagawa, owner of [Tokyo's Nakagawa Wine Co. Ltd.](#), which specializes in California wine, is sporting a bright orange jacket and shirt with a wild striped tie and a golfer's tan.

Number Cruncher

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Ichizo Nakagawa, owner of Nakagawa Wine Co., Ltd. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

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Raj M. Patel, a vice president at Bank of America and owner of Patel winery. His first vintage was 2007. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

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Cristina Pearce, Robert Trone and Melissa Devore from mega-retailer Total Wine & More, after winning an auction lot. Total Wine spent more money than any other bidder at the annual event. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

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His son Sei, a former bond trader who is now company president, keeps an eye on the spreadsheet open on his white laptop and the auction catalog.

Nakagawa used to design golf courses and run the family lumber business, sampled his first California wine in the 1970s, and started his wine business in 1985.

“Once I tasted Ridge Vineyards cabernet I stopped drinking [Chateau Latour](#),” Nakagawa says, as his son translates. “I perceived huge potential for California wine in the Japanese market. It’s a useful tool for networking. You can drink it without food.”

Immortalized at home as a California wine expert in the influential Japanese wine manga series “Drops of God” (Kami no Shizuku), Nakagawa is equally famous in Napa.

Chateau Lafite

His winning \$125,000 bid in 2011 for five cases of 2009 Scarecrow, the highest ever bid at Premiere, drew a standing ovation and a flood of emails from buyers. That’s \$2,083 a bottle, more than a 2009 Chateau Lafite costs today.

“High-end Japanese people want rare California wines they can’t purchase easily,” he says.

So do Americans. Robert Trone, co-owner of [Total Wine & More](#), an independent wine retailer with 89 superstores, paid \$75,000 for the most expensive lot, 10 cases of the luscious 2011 “We Will Rock You” cabernet blend from Bevan Cellars and [Chateau Boswell Winery](#). He also splashed out \$50,000 for five cases (\$833 a bottle) of tannic, powerful 2011 [Shafer Sunspot Vineyard](#) cabernet, produced from the tiny parcel of land that also provides the heart of their cult cab Hillside Select.

“It’s for a good cause,” Trone says, with a grin. Auction proceeds help fund the [Napa Valley Vintners](#) association.

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Debbie and Randy Lewis at the Premiere Napa Valley auction. Nakagawa Wine Co., Ltd., won the bid for their special 2011 Lewis Cellars Premiere Blend cabernet. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

Nakagawa is more cautious. "This year is complicated," he says. "2011 is not the greatest year. 2012 is better." Still, he bought five cases of plush 2011 [Revana Family Vineyard Premier Cuvee](#) cabernet (one of my top wines) for \$15,000 and another five of spicy 2011 [Lewis Cellars](#) cabernet for \$26,000, among other lots.

Cellar Stocker

Like most auction buyers here, Nakagawa has commissions from customers for specific lots; the rest of his purchases will fatten his inventory.

I was more impressed than I expected with the 2011 vintage, a year vintners spin as "challenging," due to heavy rains right before harvest. Winemakers who picked early or managed to prevent mildew and rot, made delicious wines that have lovely, juicy fruit, bright acidity, and aren't buried under the high alcohol that often plagues Napa cabs. On the other hand, many wineries failed to get it right.

My top picks among these 2011s include the complex earth-and-cherry 2011 Corison Winery Premiere Reserve; the bright, rich, cassis-flecked 2011 [Kapcsandy Family Winery](#) cabernet; a dark, intense 2011 [Spottswode Estate Vineyard & Winery](#) cabernet; silky-textured 2011 [Notre Vin](#) winery's

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From Bevan Cellars, Russell Bevan, left, and Victoria De Crescenzo, right, with Susan Boswell, of Chateau Boswell Winery, center. Total Wine & More bid \$75,000, the auction's highest bid, for 120 bottles of their joint special red cuvee 2011 "We Will Rock You." Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

"One Hundred Vines" cabernet; and the concentrated, plummy 2011 [Continuum Estate](#) cab blend.

Opulent Cabernet

I also made some new impressive discoveries: the supple, elegant 2011 [St. Helena](#) Winery cabernet sauvignon, just its second vintage; a pure, violet-scented 2011 [Detert Family Vineyards](#) cabernet franc, made from 60-year-old vines; and the ripe, opulent 2011 Patel Tourmaline Vineyard cabernet.

Tracking down Premiere wines outside the auction used to be tough, though now the Napa Valley Vintners posts on its website the names of the winning bidders for each lot. Now may be a good time to contact them if you want to buy before the Dow climbs any higher.

(Elin McCoy writes on wine and spirits for Muse, the arts and leisure section of [Bloomberg News](#). The opinions expressed are her own.)

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