

Fairmont

VOL.8 No.2

TURNING MOMENTS INTO MEMORIES

MARVELOUS MAKATI

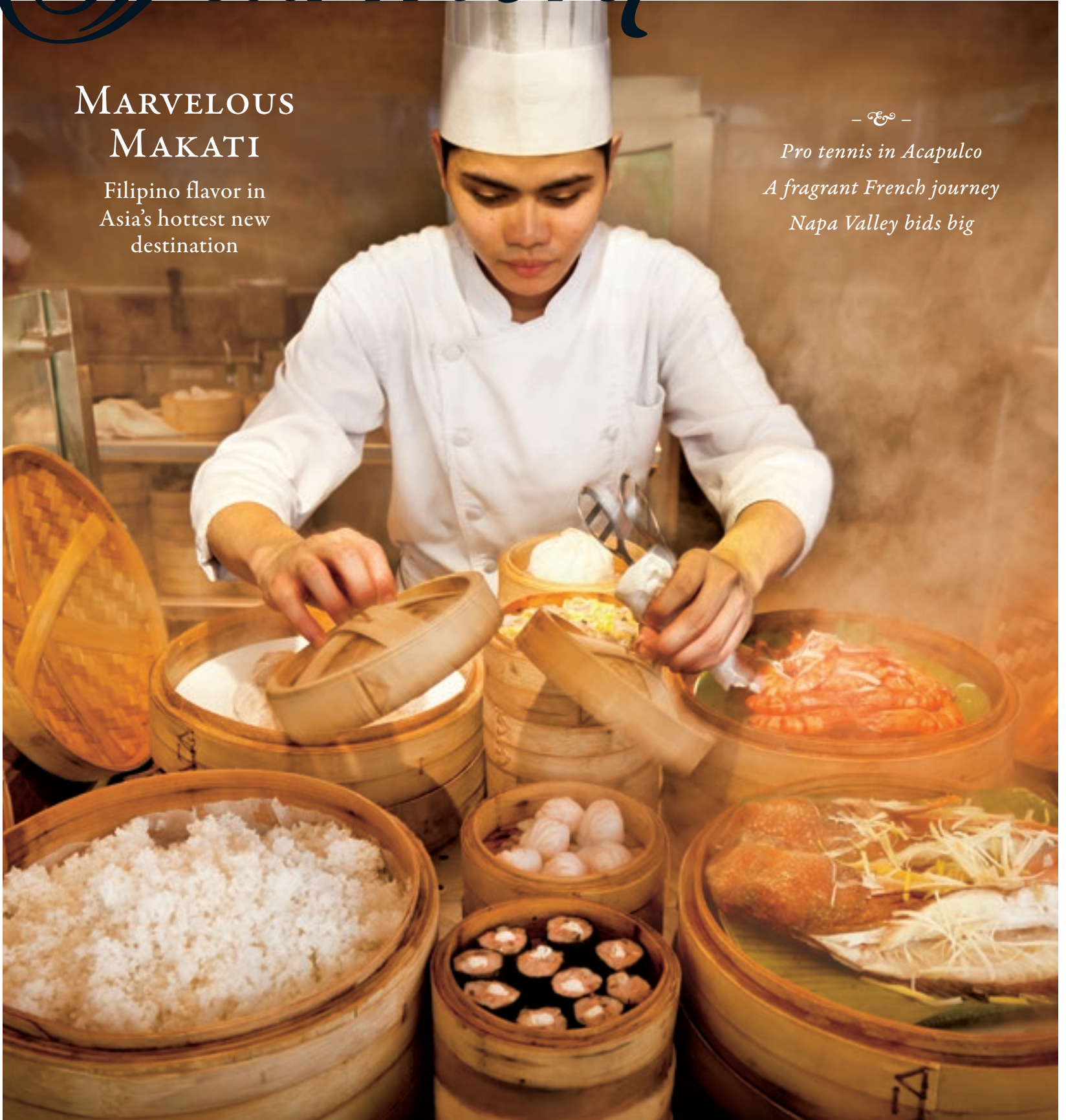
Filipino flavor in
Asia's hottest new
destination

— ❦ —

Pro tennis in Acapulco

A fragrant French journey

Napa Valley bids big





It Takes a Valley

*In California wine country,
the year's biggest party eschews bling and ball gowns for
good food, philanthropy and a little healthy competition.*

BY EVE THOMAS — PHOTOS BY RICHMOND LAM





CLINK! A toast to the winemakers. *Clang!* A new bid on a barrel. *Clap!* The gavel goes down on a 12-liter Balthazar of Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon, a steal at half a million dollars. Bidders be warned: Auction Napa Valley is not for the faint of heart.

“Jump in!” urges Humphrey Butler from the front of the room. “This isn’t a private party!” The British auctioneer is all gentle teasing and witty asides, prowling the stage in jeans and a dress shirt, the top buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. When a blending session with winemaker Michel Rolland is on the block, Butler cuts through the crowd of paddles to beseech the top bidder directly: “Do not stop, sir, I implore you. I flew all the way from England for this.”

As the gavel claps once again there’s a burst of rainbow confetti, hugs and high fives at the winning table. A Black Eyed Peas song rings throughout the massive tent like it’s halftime at the Super Bowl, and guests take a break from bidding, sipping and shaking mini tambourines to try some local sorbet.

The runners-up at my table are grinning despite their defeat. They lower their paddles, pulses still racing, faces flushed from the California sun – and perhaps a drop or two of pinot. It’s clear they didn’t just come to wine country to win big.

The 33rd Auction Napa Valley may offer elite lots, competitive crowds and high stakes (before the weekend’s done, it will raise a record \$16.9 million for local charities), but one thing’s certain: This sure ain’t Sotheby’s.

“When people found out I was coming here, they said, ‘Oh, you’re going to need a tuxedo, ball gown, something glam!’” recalls Alison Crary, associate winemaker at Sterling Vineyards. “As you can see, that’s not really the case.”

In Napa, the darkest suits are reserved for limo drivers, the stiffest shirts for wait staff and the statement headwear – ivory cowboy hats – for community volunteers. A few dandies aside, most everyone adheres to the “Napa Valley casual” dress code, meaning straw fedoras, linen shorts, colorful sundresses and patterned Tommy Bahama tops. Flat sandals and wedges are a must for ladies who want to navigate grassy fields and twisting cellar staircases. Dark red nail polish is also trending. It’s Napa Valley Cabernet, a shade created exclusively for the event by OPI.

Even the A-listers here are good at blending in. Though Oprah →

PREVIOUS PAGE: FESTIVITIES KICK OFF AT STAG’S LEAP WINE CELLARS WITH A PRIVATE LAKESIDE DINNER; **THIS PAGE:** BIDDERS RAISE THEIR PADDLES AT MEADOWOOD; **OPPOSITE:** A VOLUNTEER ADDS A NEW BARREL BID TO THE LEADERBOARD AT RAYMOND VINEYARDS





and Jay Leno have attended in past years, the real stars are from the worlds of food and wine. “A lot of people come just so they can talk to their favorite vintners,” says Crary. Robert Mondavi’s heirs weave in and out of the barrel tasting room. Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto cranes his neck to check out a Lamborghini on display. And though he’ll be standing on stage in a few hours, honorary auction chair Garen Staglin, owner of Staglin Family Vineyard, waits patiently for his badge and table number. When someone spots him and asks what on earth he’s doing there in line with everyone else, he simply shrugs and asks, “Why not?”

If it isn’t clear from the crowd that this charity auction is unique, then look to the 46 lots on offer. While there are hot-ticket wines, the fastest paddles aren’t just vying for something to drink, they want a priceless experience: a private tour of Coco Chanel’s Parisian apartment, an after-hours viewing of da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, cooking lessons at The French Laundry.

Those who don’t bid quickly or daringly enough are still in for a weekend’s worth of memories. The actual auction is just a few hours in an annual four-day celebration of the region’s bounty, an event that’s been taking place every spring since 1981. On the first evening, guests are welcomed by vintners at private dinners across the valley. After a scenic,

45-minute drive from The Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa I find myself at Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars. It was one of the first wineries to put Napa on the map in 1976 at the famous “Judgment of Paris,” which had California wines beating out the French in a blind taste test. Here, feasting on oysters and gourmet s’mores near Fay Lake, I find the faces that will become familiar over the next few days: an oncologist and oenophile from India, a wine lawyer who makes the trip every year from Florida, a couple from China with a private cellar showcasing California wines.

On day two, the lots come to life under the tents at Raymond Vineyards. Former US Ski Team members (and identical twins) hand out snow cones to promote a trip to Park City, Utah, to watch the Sochi Olympics. A towering cardboard cutout of Yao Ming showcases the basketballer’s winery and guided tours in Beijing and Shanghai. It’s also the day to sample right from the barrel, with winemakers dipping pipettes and doling out their best and rarest blends to fans. Each new bid is announced loudly as a wooden panel is dropped through metal rails onto the leaderboard.

A COLORFUL CAST OF CHARACTERS AT AUCTION NAPA VALLEY, INCLUDING VIP BIDDERS, VINTNERS, VOLUNTEERS AND MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL BOYS & GIRLS CLUB, WHO GREET GUESTS WITH BUBBLES AND PAPER FLOWERS

Having traveled the Old World’s vineyards, it’s a bit odd hearing how much California’s wine country has changed.

The last full day is the live auction at Meadowood Napa Valley, where guests are greeted by a Dixieland band and trays of bubbly. By the croquet lawn, *Top Chef* winners offer up signatures as well as signature dishes, including butter soup and ox tongue. After the frenzied live auction, the night continues with haute comfort food from Blackberry Farm – fried chicken, ribs and fixings, all served family-style. As the winner of a raffled Audi R8 Spyder is announced, a few women in the audience grab macaron-hued parasols off their tables and twirl them in celebration, kicking off a night of dancing as the sweltering sun finally recedes past the redwood trees.

“Don’t forget, we used to be plum trees and walnut groves,” says volunteer Allison Saether from behind a crowded water stand, its white surface already dotted with drops of red wine. A retired nurse and longtime local, she’s been involved in the auction for 25 years, watching it grow alongside the region itself. “I still remember when Napa didn’t mean ‘wine’ wherever you went!” she says.

Having traveled the Old World’s vineyards, thick with history and ancient growth, it’s a bit odd hearing how much California’s wine country has changed and continues to transform. Its reputation may have been kick-started by the Judgment of Paris, but like the auction itself, modern visitors are drawn here looking beyond their next bottle.

“People come to taste but they want a reason to stick around,” observes Christian Lopez from the visitor center at Cakebread Cellars, which emphasizes wine and food pairings through cookbooks, resident chefs, cooking classes and wine label QR codes that lead drinkers to online tasting notes and exclusive recipes. As Lopez says, “We don’t want to be a ‘belly up to the bar, pour and ignore’ winery.”

Jean-Charles Boisset echoes the sentiment. “Some wineries want to get you to buy something and leave – we want you to stay!” he says before walking a small group of guests through Raymond Vineyards’ veritable on-site campus. It includes a classroom lined with soil-filled →

NAPA & SONOMA, CALIFORNIA

STAY THE FAIRMONT SONOMA MISSION INN & SPA is in the heart of its own burgeoning wine country, as well as a scenic 45-minute drive from Napa Valley. Book a newly renovated suite and you'll enjoy a wood-burning fireplace and a welcome bottle of wine (with a new tree planted for every room booked). At 40,000 square feet (3,700 square meters), the hotel's Willow Stream Spa is a destination in itself, on the site of mineral hot springs. The Wine Country Recovery treatment is great for taking you from wine tasting to gourmet dinner, soothing sun-damaged skin and tired feet with a soak, aloe wrap and massage. fairmont.com/sonoma

DINE To really savor California wine country at the hotel's Michelin-rated restaurant, SANTÉ, order the chef's tasting menu with wine selections. From truffle risotto to orange soufflé cut with crème anglaise, every bite in this seasonally oriented menu is perfectly paired.

While in Napa, see what goes best with burgers at GOTT'S ROADSIDE or pack a picnic full of local delicacies at OAKVILLE GROCERY (founded in 1881, it's the oldest continually operated grocery store in the state). gotts.com, oakvillegrocery.com

DO Book the hotel's SOMMELIER APPRENTICE PACKAGE and you'll get wine and cheese upon arrival as well as VIP tours of local vineyards.

Fairmont President's Club members have access to Napa wines in California and across the United States through the Taste Napa Valley program, which offers flights of the region's finest wines at select Fairmont hotels. Members in the US can also take the experience home with them through the NAPA VALLEY WINE CLUB. In partnership with Dean & DeLuca, it offers a quarterly, curated selection of bottles delivered straight to your door.

The next AUCTION NAPA VALLEY event starts June 7, 2014. Check online or with the concierge for ticket and event information. fairmont.com/promotions/nvv, deandeluca.com, auctionnapavalley.org



apothecary jars and a hallway full of atomizers that diffuse the aromas – rose, pepper, fig – found in wines.

Saether emphasizes another way the auction stands out among charity galas. “People come from all across the world, but every penny stays right here,” she says. “The auction has really brought Napa Valley together as a whole community.”

All the locals seem to agree, from a second-generation grape grower who's donating an acre of land (and potential profits) to help expand the Napa River to the young members of the Boys & Girls Club who greet guests at Meadowood with handmade paper flowers. They see the effects of the auction, which has raised nearly \$110 million for youth, health care and housing charities since its inception, every day when they drive to work or go to school. The event isn't just a fundraiser – it's a reminder that Napa's newfound riches aren't worth much unless they trickle down to everyone.

The very last lot on offer, number 46, is proof positive that the community spirit is more than just talk. Before bidding starts, Nashville singer-songwriter Billy Dean is called to the stage to debut a song penned for the event. It's called “Walk with Me,” and as he name-checks the valley's regions, from St. Helena to Calistoga, attendees raise their paddles for the cause. This time around, there are no trips on offer, no parties, no barrels. Everyone is in it just to help. Just for the experience. ~

THE FAIRMONT SONOMA MISSION INN & SPA RECENTLY UNDERWENT A MAJOR REFURBISHMENT, INCLUDING A NEWLY-DECORATED LOBBY (ABOVE RIGHT), THOUGH THE STRIKING EXTERIOR, WILLOW STREAM SPA AND SANTÉ RESTAURANT ARE AS ICONIC AS EVER