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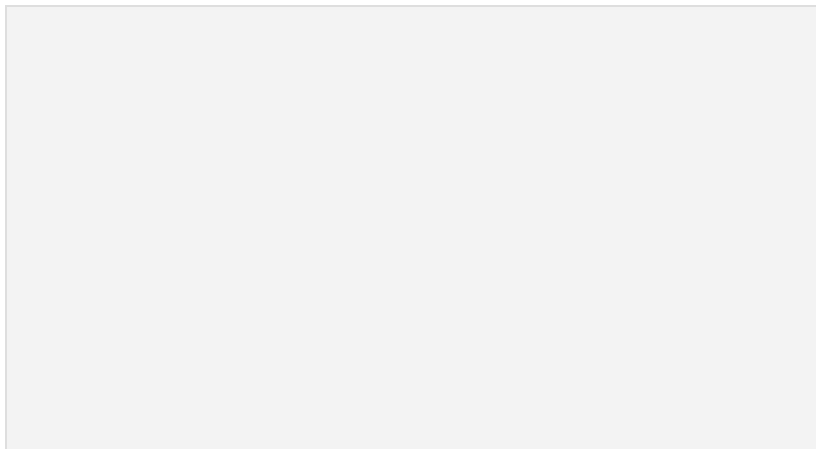
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Bidding for Success at the Napa Wine Auction

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By **Michelle Locke** on Jun 11, 2013

It's a brilliant California day and it's about 1000 degrees in the tasting tent at the annual Napa Valley barrel auction. I'm wilting in a plain summer frock and sandals. But my escort, vintner Jean-Charles Boisset, isn't even breaking a sweat despite being fully rigged out in dark slacks and a sharply tailored jacket complete with a ruby-red lip-shaped lapel pin.



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Jean-Charles Boisset and Gina Gallo at Auction Napa Valley barrel auction. Image by Michelle Locke

Our mission is to find Boisset's wife, Gina Gallo, to shoot a picture of wine's power couple, (he from a French winemaking family, she from the California wine dynasty) but our progress is turning into the journey of a thousand handshakes. Everyone wants to say hello to Boisset, hosting the event at his Raymond Vineyards property, and he's not about to brush anyone off.

"Good to see you! You're looking great," he says, kissing hands and clapping shoulders before pausing to hold an animated conversation in French with Swiss-born Margrit Mondavi, widow of the late wine country pioneer Robert Mondavi. Then it's on for a few words with Bill Harlan, founder of the high-end Harlan Estate and Bond wineries, before chatting with a couple of volunteers manning the barrel auction tally boards.

"We started at 8:30 a.m.," he announces cheerfully, "it's a fun day."

And it is a fun day. A very carefully planned fun day.

An annual event that began when Robert Mondavi got some friends together for a community fundraiser in 1981, Auction Napa Valley has donated \$110 million to health, youth and affordable housing nonprofit programs over the past 33 years. It's held the first weekend in June and is an interesting conjunction of haves and have-nots, on the one hand well-to-do bidders and on the other people – some of whom work in the wine/tourism industry – so poor they lack basic services.

For guests, the four-day event is a seamless whirl of sipping, supping and spending. But behind the scenes there's a small army at work from the celebrity chefs cooking up fabulous feasts to the volunteers organizing the parking lot shuttles.

"We spent a lot of time planning," says Garen Staglin, whose family chaired Auction Napa Valley this year.



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To generate interest, pre-auction dinners were held in Shanghai, Hong Kong, New York, Los Angeles and other cities. The result was that tickets were sold out by the first week of April, the earliest ever.

The attention to detail included designing crowd flow; the lively atmosphere at the barrel auction, a skillful mix of densely packed venues and mellower spaces, was no accident. Staglin tapped the expertise of the event planner who designed the 2005 wedding of pop star Christina Aguilera held at the Staglins' Napa Valley estate.

Despite all the orchestration, there's still room for spontaneity.

Take the Friday night party at the CADE Estate winery in Angwin hosted by vintner John Conover where guests got to enjoy stunning valley views from the patio while dining on sushi prepared by Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto. Later in the evening, philanthropist Gordon Getty, a partner in CADE and its sister wineries Plumpjack Estate and Odette Estate, gave his opinion on corks (not a fan) and got into a friendly discussion with another guest called Georg. That would be as in Georg Riedel of the famous stemware, naturally.



Gordon Getty speaking at the CADE Estate party

As the stars swung low over Howell Mountain, Getty, a trained musician and classical composer, sang full-throated renditions of "Summertime," and "If I Loved You."

Total raised over the four-day event? A record-breaking \$16.9 million. Ending the day with a serenade from a billionaire? Priceless.

Top 5 Live Auction lots:

- ✧ \$1.02 million. A Dana Estates offering that included wine and an exclusive trip to winery owner Hi Sang Lee's native country of South Korea. When the bidding escalated beyond \$500,000, the winery offered to double the lot, hence the total.
- ✧ \$800,000. Harlan Estate, four magnums of any selection from the winery's library.
- ✧ \$500,000. Screaming Eagle. 12-liter bottle of wine.
- ✧ \$450,000. Joseph Phelps Vineyard. Collection of 40 wines celebrating the winery's 40th anniversary.
- ✧ \$260,000. 100 bottles honoring the 100th birthday of Robert Mondavi.

Top Barrel Auction lots (10 cases):

- ✧ Shafer Vineyards, \$78,000
- ✧ Realm Cellars, \$61,350
- ✧ Continuum Estate, \$59,200
- ✧ Ovid Napa Valley, \$52,500
- ✧ Cardinale, \$44,500



Michelle Locke is a freelance lifestyles writer based in the San Francisco Bay area. She blogs at [Vinecdote](#).

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