

The surreal thing

By Laura Rafaty

The Friday opener of Auction Napa Valley always provides plenty of surreal sights, although I hear that the weekend gatherings provide even more.



Rafaty

I've heard tales of 110-pound cheetahs lounging on the Meadowood fairway alongside purring Jaguars (the four-wheeled species), of distinguished revelers dousing one another with squirt guns at resplendent dining tables, and of Robert Mondavi modeling a dinner jacket made entirely of wine corks for auction by Jay Leno, fetching \$95K. And speaking of emcees, I hear Ryan Seacrest once spontaneously raised 70 grand by inviting eight bidders to hang out with him backstage at "American Idol." I wouldn't know, because such extravagant weekend auction events are above my pay-grade, or more precisely, above my press-pass access.

Still I was thrilled to once again troll the Friday marketplace for signs of Auction Napa Valley's trademark brand of over-the-top indulgence in the name of warm-your-heart philanthropy.

In past years I've spotted Oprah Winfrey, or the specter of her anyway, dressed in blazing yellow and surrounded by a phalanx of large, black-suited

bodyguards, her filtered image shimmering like the sun peeking through a forest of towering Versace-clad sequoias. I've watched eager, overstuffed crowds descending en masse into the serpentine water-featured caves at Jarvis Winery, like vacationing Disneyland passport-holders waiting to board the Pirates of the Caribbean ride.

But I hadn't seen anything until I saw the Red Room at Raymond Vineyards, which I was privileged to visit this past Barrel-Auction Friday morning, bright and early, for breakfast.

Plunging into this darkened lair from the bright Napa Valley morning sunlight, it took time for my eyes, and then my brain, to process what I was seeing. There was a red velvet canopied ceiling with gleaming Baccarat crystal chandelier, reflective fleur-de-lis flocked wallpaper, and voluptuous red velvet Victorian furnishings just asking for an assignation. Offered for consumption was an abundant feast of breakfast foods and bubbly; the glossy lacquered black bar served coffee and juice to those lacking the moral courage to drink before 10 a.m.

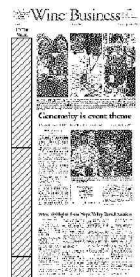
Portraits of seductively-sprawled Marilyns adorned the walls, alongside books on Playboy and Pucci. Corner glass display units offered Baccarat crystal and designer leather goods and handbags. I was puzzled by the purse display, until I remembered a female sociologist telling me that the handbag is a metaphor for certain ladyparts — which

makes it the quintessential accessory for the Red Room (although this sociologist carried an oversized, beat-en-up leather bucket bag, so what subliminal message was she sending?)

If one assumes, as I do, that the hereafter consists of one's own individually-themed luxury lounge, not

Sec **RAFATY**, Page A6 unlike Auction Napa Valley's Live-Auction lots, then the Red Room surely resembles the future heavenly abode of Hugh Hefner, where he will swap decorating tips with neighbors Sally Stanford, Mae West and Gypsy Rose Lee. What's so strikingly different about the place, as situated in the Napa Valley, is the uncensored sense of naughtiness it conveys. A Napa Valley winery can be many things — graceful, bucolic, stately, even earnest, but naughty is not in its nature. Where most tasting-rooms would be perfectly paired with a soft-rock concert, a cool jazz combo, or even a country hoedown, this opulent outpost shares a closer kinship with the burlesque peepshows of Dita von Teese.

Just as I adjusted to all this delightful decadence, hosts Jean-Charles Boisset and the Staglins started speaking. They were engaging, playful and infectiously enthusiastic, sharing stories of early-bird pledges and worthy beneficiaries, of the Staglins' exceptional efforts to extract extraordinary donations, and of Cabernet-colored nail polish — only \$30 at the Auction gift shop. Monsieur Boisset captivated the



crowd with French flourish, making everyone present — even lowly “journalists” — feel important to the Valley and to the Auction. “If you are here today, you are now members of the Red Room,” he proclaimed.

I fear his statement was purely symbolic, because I now wildly covet Red Room membership, not only so that I might at long-last invite someone to “meet me in my favorite dark bar in St. Helena,” but so I can carry the membership credential, which I imagine to be either a crystal credit card, a platinum Playboy Club-type key, or a key fob in the form of a

cabernet-red velvet-covered vibrating grape cluster.

Back outside on the expansive lawns of Raymond Winery, there were echoes of the Red Room’s bordello-chic, but this time in tastefully-placed white divans and carved white chairs that glowed in the blinding hot Napa sun. White café table sets sat under sheltering trees, sunlight flickering through the leaves although there was no breeze. There might have been a white peacock in a cage, or perhaps I dreamt it.

What stayed with me was not the sight of the Red Room, or the lovely winery and its festive food

and wine marketplace, or even the fevered bidding at the barrel auction. It was the image of Jean-Charles Boisset clearing out his own wine, just because Garen Staglin asked to use Raymond’s barrel room for the weekend, to raise money for Napa Valley neighbors in need. That’s an image I find absolutely, wonderfully, surreal.

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