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Auction Napa Valley Raises a Record \$16.9 Million

Napa's premier charity event is once again the nation's highest-earning charity wine auction

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This year's Auction Napa Valley live bidding got off to a fast start, and didn't stop until records were shattered. With 45 lots, the auction raised \$14.3 million in less than four hours at the June 1 auction, more than twice last year's \$6.1 million figure. By the end of the four-day event, Napa Valley Vintners had raised more than \$16.9 million, topping their own record of \$10.5 million set in 2005. This figure also puts Auction Napa Valley back on top as the country's highest-earning charity wine auction. The Naples Winter Wine Festival has held the top spot since 2004, raising a record \$15.67 million haul in 2007, but brought in only \$8.5 million in January.

Bidding has slowed in recent years during rough economic times, but paddles were flying up this year. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has enjoyed seven straight months of gains and the U.S. housing market has shown signs of healthy recovery, which may have given bidders more of an appetite for donating. Beneficiaries from the auction include Napa-area health care, youth services and affordable housing groups.

There weren't any signs of celebrities, however, as in past years when the likes of Oprah Winfrey or Jay Leno were on hand to drum up excitement for lots. This year's star power was provided by the vintners themselves and their wines, and the appeal of Napa Valley—large amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon, meals cooked by celebrity chefs and travel to wine regions. Most of the lots included wine, but spotlighted luxury accommodations, sports cars, and exclusive opportunities, such as an insider's look at the America's Cup race, a blending session with famed winemaking consultant Michel Rolland, cooking class at the French Laundry, and an after-hours, private viewing of Da Vinci's *Last Supper* during an Italian getaway.

The 33rd annual auction weekend began Thursday May 30, with private parties at wineries. Friday's Barrel Auction and Marketplace took place on the grounds of Raymond Vineyards, where a crowd of 2,000 braved the heat and sampled wine from 100 producers and food from dozens of restaurants and artisanal purveyors. There were reminders of the upcoming live auction lots, with the America's Cup to admire, as well as sports cars.

Before the bidding began on Saturday at the Meadowood resort, more than 900 attendees got a chance to enjoy a walk-around lunch prepared by some past winners of Bravo's *Top Chef*, including Richard Blais, Harold Dieterle, Hung Huynh, Stephanie Izzard and the most recent winner, Kristen Kish. The



Jason Tinacci for Auction Napa Valley

Attendees at Auction Napa Valley practice raising their paddles.

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chefs posed for photographs and signed autographs.

Bidders were invited to the air-conditioned tent by a rousing gospel choir. The three auctioneers—Fritz Hatton, Ursula Hermancinski and Humphrey Butler—kept the 45-lot auction moving at a brisk pace. After the 17th lot, vintners celebrated raising \$5.5 million. The excitement crescendoed with the \$800,000 Harlan lot, which included a vertical tasting of 20 vintages of Harlan for eight people and four 6-liter bottles from their library. A lot from Dana Estates for a trip to South Korea was doubled, with two winning bidders pledging more than \$500,000 each. Screaming Eagle's single 12-liter bottle of 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon sold for \$500,000.

Throughout the festivities, the Staglin family, this year's auction chairs, spoke about the need to make an emotional connection with the beneficiaries, and they did just that before opening bidding on the final, "Marvels to Miracles" Fund-a-Need lot, which will help Napa County nonprofits implement programs for children's health and education, including mental health services. The Staglins stood on stage, hand in hand as son Brandon spoke about his struggles with schizophrenia. Napa District Attorney Gary Lieberstein took the microphone to talk about recently losing his son to suicide, and musician Billy Dean sang an original song called "Walk With Me," to further tug at the auction-goers' heartstrings and wallets. Without any promise of trips or bottles of wine, the paddles went up bidding in increments from \$1,000 to \$500,000, raising a total of \$3.7 million.

There were also creative ways attendees were encouraged to donate money. There was a raffle for an Audi Spyder R8, with only 500 tickets available at \$1,000 apiece. The barrel auction—unique to other wine auctions—was extended until after the live auction finished, giving those who found themselves outbid on live lots an opportunity to still have a winning bid. An e-auction offered trips, meals and bottles of wine, but also allowed direct donations of any amount to Fund-a-Need. There was even an exclusive nail polish donated by OPI sold at the festivities, called Napa Valley Cabernet.

After the live bidding was over, vintners celebrated with bottles of their own wine and dinner prepared by chef Joseph Lenn of Blackberry Farm, (a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award winner). Fried chicken, smoked potatoes and salt and pepper ribs were served family style, while live music played and everyone marveled at how much money was raised.

Jeffrey Miller, a real-estate developer from Miami, was excited about the \$880,000 he spent on three different lots, including the Favia Erickson South African Safari, the Araujo fly-fishing trip to Montana and the Tusk Estate lot, which includes a chance to travel with the San Francisco 49ers on the team plane and a 2013 NFC Championship ring. "It's not about the wine, it's not about the trips," insisted Miller. "It's about giving back to the community."

Top Live-Auction Lots

Marvels to Miracles/Fund-a-Need: \$3.7 million

Dana Estate: \$1.02 million

Three double-magnums of wine, seven-day trip for two couples to South Korea and the Jeju Island; winning bid was \$510,000, paid by two separate bidders

Harlan Estate: \$800,000

Comprehensive vertical tasting of 20 vintages of Harlan for eight, two nights at Meadowood and four double-magnums

Screaming Eagle: \$500,000

One 12-liter bottle of Screaming Eagle 2010

Joseph Phelps Vineyards: \$450,000

40 bottles of wine, four days in Italy for two couples, tour at Gaja, dinner for 10 in Napa Valley

Darioush: \$400,000

14-night voyage on the world's largest private mega yacht, dinner at Darioush's private property, two double-magnums of wine

Staglin Family Vineyard: \$400,000

Five night golfing vacation in Scotland, five night stay at Skibo Castle, two nights in London, dinner at Alain Ducasse, private golf lessons from Hank Haney.

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