

# The Press Democrat

## Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction breaks records with \$4.5 million haul

BY PEG MELNIK  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

September 6, 2015, 10:59PM



Suzy Fridell, left, and Chandra Friese, right, perform with Magnum Force during the Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction at Chateau St. Jean on Sunday, September 6, 2015 in Kenwood. (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)

A recreation of the 1915 World's Fair — complete with a Model T Ford and a barbershop quartet — created a colorful backdrop for a record-breaking afternoon of bidding at Sunday's Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction.

The spiraling bids climbed to \$4.5 million, up from last year's \$4 million.

About 650 people gathered under the magnolia trees at Kenwood's Chateau St. Jean winery for an afternoon that looked like a step back in time. There were plenty of costumed flappers and Charlie Chaplin lookalikes to highlight the theme "From Sonoma to the World's Fair."

Generosity was in plentiful supply, and fundraising under the white tent gained momentum throughout the day with an outpouring of six-digit contributions by the end.

The most spirited — and sentimental — lot was the “Fund the Future” offering, benefiting literacy in Sonoma County. A group of 178 bidders pooled their efforts to “buy” the lot — in reality, making a donation — for \$1.9 million. This year’s take broke last year’s \$1.7 million record for the same cause.



Emilio Zanin hugs Jean-Charles Boisset after winning a trip to France with Boisset as the host during the Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction at Chateau St. Jean on Sunday, September 6, 2015 in Kenwood, California . (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)

To introduce the literacy campaign to bidders, a group of children gathered on the stage before a video played.

On the screen, Mary Dewane, co-vintner of Santa Rosa’s Benovia and one of the auction chairs, told viewers, “Our children are our future, and we’ll be a stronger, better and more prosperous county if we educate our children.”

Dewane, her husband Joe Anderson, and the family and board members of Benovia contributed a total of \$385,000 to the lot.

Another collaborative group, donating a total of \$250,000, were vintners Bill and Eva Price, along with Jean-Charles Boisset and Gina Gallo, who reeled in contributions with a fundraising dinner at Three Sticks Wine’s The Adobe in Sonoma.

Big spenders included vintner Tom Klein of Rodney Strong Vineyards, who pledged a total of \$200,000; Jackson Family Wines president and CEO Rick Tigner, who contributed \$150,000 on behalf of the company; vintner Matt Gallo of the Gallo family, who donated \$150,000; and Corey Beck, president of Francis Ford Coppola Winery, who contributed \$100,000 on behalf of the winery.



Kim and Robert Kiyosaki hug Jean-Charles Boisset, center, after winning a trip to France with Boisset as the host during the Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction at Chateau St. Jean on Sunday, September 6, 2015 in Kenwood, California . (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)

In between bidding, paddle-holders were treated to a bevy of wines and caloric entrees like crispy fried chicken, Pacific king salmon and corn tartlets. The food seemed to give them energy, while the wine appeared to cure them of any buyer's remorse.

The Hamel Family Wines offering, which sold for \$420,000, was a highly sought-after lot. It featured a dinner prepared by James Beard Award-winning chef Patrick O'Connell, coupled with a solo performance by Bruce Hornsby. The group lot went for \$5,000 per couple.

Dewane spent \$10,000 on the lot to support the auction and because she's "a big fan of Bruce Hornsby," she said.

One of the most colorful lots of the day, Magnum Force, was introduced by a group of dancers in gold-sequined flapper costumes.

The lot featured 158 magnums of wine, and Laura and James Dixon of Naples, Fla., who bought it, said they plan to add them to their 14,000-bottle wine cellar.

"I consider these lots door prizes to give money to children," Laura Dixon said. "Also, the women worked so hard on their routine, we had to buy it."

The Dixons, who will be the chairs of next year's Naples Winter Wine Festival, said about 20 people came from their city to attend the auction. "We support each other," Laura said.

The auction — organized by the Sonoma County Vintners and the Sonoma Valley Vintners and Growers groups — benefits several local charities, with an emphasis on children, health and the environment.

However, the focus this year was clearly on literacy, with nearly half of the proceeds devoted to the cause.

About 54 percent of all third-grade students in Sonoma County are reading below proficiency levels. The wine industry is hoping to increase the third-grade literacy rate to 90 percent by 2018 through the Fund the Future campaign.

While this year's auction set records, Auction Napa Valley and the Naples festival continue to trump the Sonoma County event in fundraising. Napa raised nearly \$16 million during its four-day string of events in June, while Naples raised about \$12 million in January.

Organizers remain undaunted.

"We're the third-largest wine auction in the country behind Napa and Naples. That's not a bad place to be," said Francis Ford Coppola Winery's Beck, president of the Sonoma County Vintners.

*Wine writer Peg Melnik can be reached at 521-5310 or [peg.melnik@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:peg.melnik@pressdemocrat.com).*