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Barossa Valley Estate is one of the world's most famous wine regions.

EVENT WRAP-UP

Sonoma

Wine Country Weekend



Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction bidders.

*The Luxury Wine Romp with
a Heart of Gold*



Tents erected at MacMurray Ranch for Taste of Sonoma.

by Jaime Lewis

To the 5,000 attendees at this year's Sonoma Wine Country Weekend, the messaging was clear: Sonoma County is one of the most diverse, independent and philanthropic appellations on the globe.

"The people here give everything," said Gina Gallo, whose family's E. & J. Gallo portfolio includes the Russian River Valley AVA's MacMurray Estate Vineyards. "It's about people first, then agriculture, farming and the dirt. Sonoma means diversity: the ocean, the river, the hills. There's no other place in the world like it."

Indeed, at one million acres (half of which is still in its natural state), with the largest coastline of any wine region in the world, and with 17 AVAs within its borders, Sonoma County supports an unmatched wealth of diverse growing conditions, varieties and producers. There is Los Carneros AVA to the south, home of Ram's Gate Winery, where Winemaker Jeff Gaffner crafts 10,000 cases of Pinot Noir and star-bright, beautifully acidic Chardonnay. And there is Knight's Valley AVA, 45 miles north, where Chateau St. Jean and Winemaker Margo Van Staaveren source broad-shouldered Cabernet Sauvignon and supple Merlot for



Bites at the Big Bottle Barn Party, a kick-off for Sonoma Wine Country Weekend featuring large-format bottles.

PHOTO: MELANIE MALONEY

PHOTO: MICHAEL WOOLSEY



PHOTO: DWAIN ELIOTT

Carolyn Stark, Executive Director of Sonoma County Vintners, and Maureen Cottingham, Executive Director of the Sonoma Valley Vintners & Growers Alliance.

their flagship Bordeaux blend, Cinq Cépages. And then there are the lauded Zinfandels of Alexander Valley AVA and Dry Creek AVAs—and many, many points in between.

But the wines and appellations aren't the only points of diversity here; Sonoma County boasts plenty of socio-economic diversity, too. According to a summary of 2010 U.S. Census data, more than one in seven children in Sonoma County lives in poverty, and more than one in four Sonoma County residents lives in economic hardship. Facts like these inspired the original Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction 35 years ago and continue to inspire the larger Sonoma Wine Country Weekend, presented since 2006 as a partnership between the Sonoma Valley Vintners & Growers Alliance and Sonoma County Vintners. Guided by Honorary Co-Chairs Jean-Charles Boisset of Buena Vista Winery and DeLoach Vineyards and Joe Anderson and Mary Dewane of Benovia Winery, the



PHOTO COURTESY OF J. & S. GALLO WINERY

Winemaker Gina Gallo.



PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE

Honorary Co-Chair Jean-Charles Boisset pouring Buena Vista wines at Taste of Sonoma.

PHOTO: GEORGE ROSE



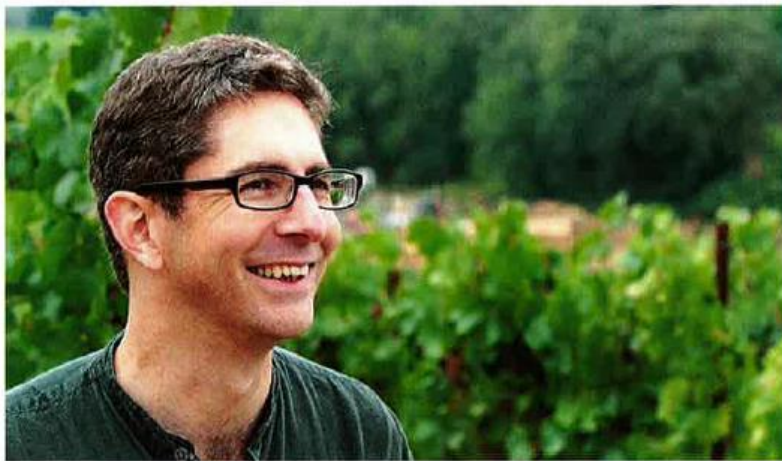
Chateau St. Jean Winemaker Margo Van Staaveren.

PHOTO: MELANIE MALONEY



Kate MacMurray at her family's ranch in the Russian River Valley.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MACMURRAY ESTATE VINEYARDS



Winemaker Boyd Morrison of MacMurray Estate Vineyards.

auction raised a record-breaking \$4.5 million toward community grants for local charities, as well as an initiative called Fund the Future, which seeks to increase literacy rates among Sonoma County children from 46 to 90 percent by 2018.

Sean Carroll, Director of Marketing and Communications for Sonoma County Winegrowers, says Sonoma's deep roots are a result of its history

and culture. "If you compare Sonoma County to other districts, one of the big differentiators is that most of the vineyards here are independently owned by growers and farmers. They're not connected to wineries." In fact, he shared, a staggering 86 percent of vineyards in Sonoma County are grower-owned, and of those, 40 percent comprise 20 acres or less. "That means you see a lot of hands-on, family-owned producers

who put their passion and personal investment into their farming," he said, and, by extension, their community.

Plenty of those producers were on display at the Taste of Sonoma, a centerpiece of the weekend along with the Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction and another tasting event called Starlight at Francis Ford Coppola Winery. Taste of Sonoma is hosted by MacMurray Estate Vineyards, whose vines were planted after the Gallo family purchased the ranch in 1996. Settled in the 1940s in a secluded corner of the Russian River Valley and occupied for decades by Hollywood actor Fred MacMurray and his family, the ranch's homestead is maintained in pristine original condition and Fred's daughter, Kate MacMurray, is now part of the team that promotes the brand and its wines, made by Winemaker Boyd Morrison.

Taste of Sonoma includes a wide array across the region, as well as farm-to-table bites, pairing seminars like the Kendall-Jackson Sensory Experience led by Executive Chef Justin Wangler and Winemaker Randy Ullom, and small-group tours through the event with guest sommeliers like Matt Dulle of the St. Louis Club of Missouri, who won this year's Sommelier Stars Challenge, sponsored by Rodney Strong Vineyards.

Of course, given that Sonoma Wine Country Weekend happened concurrently with the 2015 vintage's extremely early harvest, many winemakers and growers were in the throes of picking throughout the festivities. Across Sonoma County, producers saw "hens and chicks," uneven-sized berries on clusters due to poor fruit set last spring, as well as drastically reduced yields; as for quality, however, the forecast looks beautiful for the 2015 vintage.

"Most of our vintners and growers are 50 to 60 percent through harvest, which is incredible," said Maureen Cottingham, Executive Director of the Sonoma Valley Vintners & Growers Alliance. "Usually they're at nine or ten percent by this time. Everyone is scurrying around because they know that Sonoma Wine Country Weekend is the most important weekend of the year." ■