

Wine Spectator

Wine-Country Wildfire Recovery Benefit Raises Over \$3.4 Million

Star chef Thomas Keller, vintner Ann Colgin and other top winemakers and chefs headlined a blockbuster benefit for Napa and Sonoma wildfire relief



Photo by: Alanna Hale

Thomas Keller, center, with David Breeden, French Laundry chef de cuisine.

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Wine Spectator Grand Award-winning chefs and leading members of the Napa and Sonoma county wine community helped power a dinner and charity auction on the night of Dec. 2 that raised more than \$3.4 million to benefit recovery efforts in the wake of October's devastating wildfires in California's North Bay counties.

"A Night of Friendship & Neighbors" was held at the Greystone campus of the Culinary Institute of America in the Napa Valley town of St. Helena. More than \$2.3 million was raised during a live auction of prestigious lots held while 340 guests enjoyed a \$2,500-a-plate dinner in the building's old barrel cellars. (*Wine Spectator* was a sponsor of the event.)

"It's remarkable to see the response," said Matt Wilson, of Company Fine Wine, who helped organize the event. "It helps show that Napa and Sonoma counties are open for visitors and are on the road to recovery."

Congressman Mike Thompson, who represents Napa County and parts of Sonoma County, was also pleased with the results. "I thought it was fantastic. People were enthusiastic, and the cause is certainly admirable."

One of the driving forces behind the benefit was chef Thomas Keller, who operates two Grand Award-winning restaurants, [the French Laundry](#) in Yountville, Calif., and [Per Se](#) in New York. He was joined by Kyle Connaughton of [SingleThread Farms](#), Christophe Kostow of [the Restaurant at Meadowood \(also a Grand Award winner\)](#), and Stephen Durfee of the CIA at Greystone, who together presented a four-course dinner as a prelude to the auction. Fourteen wineries, including Caymus and Screaming Eagle in Napa County and Williams Selyem in Sonoma County, donated bottlings for the dinner.

Ann Colgin, who recently sold a majority stake in her Napa winery to luxury giant LVMH, presided as auctioneer. "For those of you who were here for those harrowing days, it is time to be generous," Colgin said as she opened the bidding.

The 10 lots on offer were a high-octane mix of wine, dining and luxury vacations. A dinner for 50 to be prepared by Keller, Kostow and Connaughton sold for \$250,000. In a show of transatlantic friendship, leading vintners in Burgundy and the Rhône Valley in France donated a lot of large-format bottlings that sold for \$200,000.

One of the many vintners in attendance was Naoko Dalla Valle, who offered a lot comprising a dinner in Tokyo with her featuring the wines from her Napa estate. It sold for \$180,000, then the lot was doubled, bringing in a total of \$360,000. "It's such an important cause," Dalla Valle said. The fires came within two miles of her winery on the east side of Napa Valley. "We are just grateful to be here."

Bidding is continuing on a number silent auction lots, including courtside basketball seat donated by superstar LeBron James, a magnum from the California collectible producer Sine Qua Non, a day interning at iconic California cuisine restaurant Chez Panisse and a private concert with John Legend for up to 30 couples at \$20,000 a piece. With proceeds from those sales and the final tallies from the live auction, event organizers expect the total raised will top \$4 million by the time bidding closes.

Napa vintner Joel Gott, another event organizer, noted that its underwriting made it possible for all the funds from the auction to go to people in need.

Alec Perkins, board member of Tipping Point, a Bay Area emergency relief organization, said that all of the monies raised will go to local charities helping those displaced and affected by the fires. "It's been incredible to see the community come together and to rally your friends and neighbors," Perkins said.

The fires, which began on Oct. 9 and were not officially declared extinguished until 23 days later, killed 44 people and burned more than 200,000 acres in Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties. Approximately 9,000 homes and structures were destroyed in the fires. They rank as the most destructive wildfires in California history.

Napa & Sonoma Relief continues to raises funds at [Tipping Point's Napa Sonoma Relief site](#). There is also an ongoing silent auction for the next two weeks.