

The Press Democrat

Sweepstakes winners named at Sonoma County Harvest Awards Gala

PEG MELNIK

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | September 30, 2018, 9:23PM



(20 of 22) George Webber of Buena Vista, left, receives the award from Nick Frey for Sweepstakes Red, Buena Vista 2016 Bela's Selection, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County Pinot Noir, during the Sonoma County Harvest Fair Awards Night at Luther Burbank Center in Santa Rosa, on Sunday, September 30, 2018. (Photo by Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

A pinot noir, a fumé blanc and a sparkling wine won the coveted sweepstakes awards Sunday night at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair Awards Night gala.

Sonoma's Buena Vista Winery won top honors for the red wine category with its 2016 Bela's Selection Russian River Valley Pinot Noir, which retails for \$50.

Ferrari-Carano, a Dry Creek Valley winery, snagged the top white with its 2017 Sonoma County Fumé Blanc at \$14, and Breathless Sparkling Wines of Healdsburg won in the specialty wines division for its 2012 Sonoma County Brut Sparkling Wine at \$54.

The awards ceremony was hosted by former Santa Rosa Mayor Mike Martini, founder and general manager of Taft Street Winery, as well as by Sonoma County Winegrowers President Karissa Kruse.

As the anniversary of the October wildfires approaches, Kruse said, "instead of thinking about what we lost, tonight I'd like us to think about what we have. ... I'd like to celebrate what remains — our strength and our spirit."

More than 500 people gathered at the Luther Burbank Center for the Arts north of Santa Rosa, each paying between \$75 and \$150 to attend the gala, which ended the suspense of the Harvest Fair's wine competition.

Accepting the award for Buena Vista was George Webber, donning a black top hat.

"I'm a fake Count Agoston Haraszthy," said Webber, who was impersonating the founder of Buena Vista, which opened in 1857 and is lauded as California's first premium winery. French vintner Jean-Charles Boisset purchased the winery in 2011.

"This is an honor for our winemaker, Brian Maloney, and vintner, Jean-Charles Boisset, who made all this possible," Webber said about Sunday's award.

Sarah Quider, executive winemaker at Ferrari-Carano, said the sweepstakes win for the top white is particularly meaningful in light of losing founder Don Carano this year.

"Don meant a lot to all of us," Quider said. "He was such a sweet man. It's a family that put this wine together. This wine was a team effort — the vineyard workers, the cellar workers, the accountants. And despite the fires, the wine still came out great."

Speaking on behalf of Breathless Sparkling Wines, winemaker Penelope Gadd-Coster said she was grateful for the high praise.

"The wine is vibrant and beautiful," Gadd-Coster said, "just like the sisters I get to work with."

The trio of sisters behind the sparkler are: Rebecca Faust, who oversees production; Sharon Cohn, who works in marketing; and Cynthia Faust, who's the manager of business development.

In addition to the industry's best winemaking, the gala also recognized all of the Sonoma County Harvest Fair's food and craft beer champions.

Many got to sample the award winners, including a delectable chicken satay from Santa Rosa's Thai Time Asia and vanilla bean ice cream from Dave's Gourmet Market, at a reception prior to the ceremony.

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Organizers also paid tribute to up-and-comers in the industry and longtime figures, as well as those farming and producing grapes sustainably, including Rodney Strong Vineyards and Duff Bevill.

Bevill farms about 10 grape varieties on 1,000 acres in Healdsburg.

"Sustainability makes sense when you want something to last a long time," Bevill said. "We've talked about having a 100-year business plan, and the No. 1 thing is taking care of the land."

Last week, organizers announced 344 gold medal winners from the pool of 1,032 wine entries. The sweepstakes winners represent the very best wines, culled from 42 best-of-class winners that emerged from three days of judging last month.

Members of the public will be able to taste the top winners at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair, which will be held Oct. 5-7 at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds.

You can reach Staff Writer Peg Melnik at 707-521-5310 or peg.melnik@pressdemocrat.com.