

WINE ENTHUSIAST

EDITOR SPEAK

Auction Napa Valley: Then and Now

A look back at 36 years of barrels and bids.

BY VIRGINIE BOONE

Now in its 36th year, **Auction Napa Valley** has been around long enough to see a baton be passed down from one generation to the next. Twenty years ago, in 1996, Agustin Huneeus of **Quintessa**, **Mount Veeder Winery** and **Franciscan Oakville Estate** chaired the auction. This year, it's his son, Agustin F. Huneeus who's in charge.

The event kicks off Friday, June 3, with the Barrel Auction hosted at **Robert Mondavi Winery**. The winery is celebrating its 50th anniversary. At the event, vintners will be pouring their current releases and selling 100-barrel lots of wine futures, raising money for the dozens of charities the event benefits. More than 2,000 guests are expected to attend.

Saturday, the live auction follows at **Meadowood**, where it has been held since 1981. Over that time, the total auction proceeds have brought in more than \$150 million for the local community. Last year's take alone was a hefty \$15.8 million.

This year, Huneeus is shifting to more of a nighttime focus, wanting to throw a good party in addition to raising money. The auction tent will take on a nightclub-like atmosphere with live music and dancing once the sun goes down.

"I'm switching up the pace, the cadence of the auction," he said. "I want to keep it briefer, to go from five hours to three, making sure the lots are really great, pound-for-pound the best lots we've ever had, do this quickly and then have a great party. We all go to a lot of great dinners, but we don't go to enough good parties."

What else has changed over the decades?

Highest bid

1996: \$150,000 for A Vintner for All Seasons (which broke records as the highest bid ever at that time), a series of four dinner parties staged by a group of vintners at the winning bidder's home anywhere in the United States, won by Chuck Sweeney, founder of Vine Cliff Winery

2016: TBD; in 2015 the highest single bid was \$850,000 for a joint lot between singer-songwriter John Legend and **Raymond Vineyards** for a 30-person dinner and private performance