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Exclusive Wine Dinner Draws V Foundation Supporters

Catherine Bigelow | August 8, 2017

High atop a hill overlooking the verdant Napa Valley, glamorous guests, many swathed in **Rubin Singer** designs, softly clinked Baccarat crystal flutes sparkling with JCB Haute Couture French bubbles as the blazing sun was slightly diffused by a soft breeze.

Yet the thread entwining these fine-feathered folks spooled beyond fashion and viticulture. Hosted by vintners **Gina Gallo** and her husband, the ebullient **Jean-Charles Boisset**, at their historic Wappo Hill home (previously owned by the late **Margrit** and **Robert Mondavi**), the cause on this recent summer's eve was cancer — for those touched by its cruelty and others fighting back by fund-raising for the V Foundation.

Since 1999, the V Foundation Wine Celebration (founded 20 years ago by venture capitalist and foundation trustee **Julie Allegro**) has raised more than \$80 million for national research programs at its three-day, valley-wide gathering, symposium and gala.

This year, supporters raised a whopping \$8.8 million at the Heart, Mind, Soul live auction gala Aug. 5 starring a McCalls Catering dinner and sizzling set by **Michael Franti & Spearhead**.

But it was the Gallo-Boisset fete three days earlier, on Aug. 2, that kicked off this year's V confab. It arose last summer — as a luxe, \$100K auction lot, “The Gems of Napa,” at the V Foundation's 2016 fund-raiser.

So 52 lucky guests alighted at the Gal-lo-Boisset **Cliff May**-designed ranch residence for a gourmet, four-course chef **Victor Scargle** feast paired with primo valley vino created by female Napa vintners, all gorgeously kitted out in couture Rubin Singer creations.

To spice things up, models sashayed about the grounds and skirted the indoor pool while sheathed in ethereal pieces from Singer's Resort 2018 Collection.

“The V Foundation was established by the late basketball coach and ESPN broadcaster **Jim Valvano**,” explained Gemstone Vineyard proprietor and Wine Celebration trustee **Amy Marks Dornbusch**. “So sports-theme items are a given. I'm friends with Rubin from New York but now live in Napa. So Jean-Charles and I dreamed up a lot relating to our valley lifestyle.”

Joining her were legendary vintners: Gina Gallo (senior winemaking director for her family's Ernest & Julio Gallo wine dynasty); **Beth Nickel** (Nickel & Nickel, Far Niente); **Blakesley Chappellet**



Catherine Bigelow / Special to The Chronicle

Winemaker Beth Nickel (left) with vintners Jean-Charles Boisset and Gina Gallo at the dinner and fashion event at Boisset and Gallo's home.



Winemaker Amy Marks Dornbusch and designer Rubin Singer at the Aug. 2 dinner.



Adam Dornbusch (left) with vintners Bo Barrett and Cyril Chappellet at the Aug. 2 dinner.

(Chappellet Winery and author of the recently released coffee-table book “Napa Valley Entertaining”); Michelle Baggett (Alpha Omega Winery); Helen Keplinger (Keplinger Wines) and her mentor, Heidi Barrett (La Sirena Wines, Barrett & Bar-rett), the Cabernet queen who created the cult classic Screaming Eagle.

“We looked through Rubin’s collections and gave him our preferences. We all wanted dresses we’d wear again,” en-thused Chappellet, whose gorgeous, “Mad Men” fitted dress was crafted from vibrant, colorful fabric. “It’s exquisite. I feel like I’m wearing an Impressionist’s garden.”

Singer (carried at Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue), has expanded his private Bay Area client base and attended last year’s gala where the auction lot was sold. He was assisted in his efforts by local stylist **Victoria Hitch-cock**.

“Napa isn’t the right environment for big ballgowns,” Singer said, with a laugh. “The ladies are wearing custom pieces based on my previous collections. It was an undertak-ing, but I wanted to reflect their personalities. Each ensemble is different in its sensibility —from Gina’s Studio 54-style pantsuit to Blakesley’s classic cocktail dress.”

Leading guests into dinner, Boisset raised a toast to Allegro for her 20-year effort establishing the V Foundation’s West Coast presence while explaining the genesis of this event.

“Gina and I were returning on a plane from the (Naples Wine Festival in Florida) with Amy and **Adam Dornbusch**, when Amy suggested we join forces on a fashion show featuring gorgeous, talented Napa Valley women who also make wine,” he toasted. “Things happen at 42,000 feet for a reason.”

According to Allegro, the V Foundation, which donates 100 cents of every dollar raised to cancer research, was one of the first organizations to fund cutting-edge studies and doctors from around the nation under a single umbrella.

And while local valley donors and vint-ners are very particular about where they donate their wines or experiences, the foundation’s research strides have at-tracted top talent.

“That’s why Beth Nickel is dressed in a ballgown tonight in 90-degree heat,” said Allegro, of the vintner whose late husband, **Gil Nickel**, died in 2003 from cancer. “I’ll never forget Gil’s final public appearance at the Wine Celebration when he encour-aged bidders by reminding them, ‘We’re just one miracle away from cancer cures.’ ”



Vintners Heidi Barrett (left), Helen Keplinger, Michelle Baggett and Blakesley Chappellet at the special evening spotlighting female winemakers.



Models Christina Zapolski (left), Kate Rasmussen and Sydney Reed in Resort 2018 fashions in designer Rubin Singer.