

Festival Napa Valley Wraps Its Eleventh Splendid Season

July 25, 2016

For ten days each July, Northern California's wine country finds itself at the heart of a cultural and philanthropic explosion.

Festival Napa Valley (formerly Festival del Sole) lures wine aficionados, fine food fanciers, and music lovers from all over the world, and has become one of America's premiere summer destination events, while at the same time enriching the region's cultural vitality with its support of arts education. (The festival is the leading funder of arts education in Napa County.) Featuring a series of exclusive performances by preeminent classical, opera, jazz, and dance artists, paired with intimate food and wine events hosted by the region's top vintners in the area's most iconic settings, the Festival turns Napa Valley into the world's biggest stage; rolling hills, lush vineyards, amazing restaurants, and elegant wineries serve as backdrops. And though the elegant series of events just wrapped its eleventh season (July 15 – 24, 2016), it's not too early to start planning for next summer's soiree. Here's what you may, or may not have, missed:

A performance by Broadway star Kristin Chenoweth at Dario Sattui's authentically-built 13th century style Tuscan castle and winery, Castello di Amorosa, opened the Festival. After parties were held the luxurious Solage Calistoga resort and at The Napa Valley Reserve, a private club in St. Helena with a membership of 500 couples who share a passion for wine and the way of life that surrounds it.

Always a Festival Napa Valley highlight and perhaps its most lavish event, the Festival Gala, hosted this year by Wayne Brady with entertainment from "O" by Cirque de Soleil, took place once again at luxurious Meadowood Napa Valley. The elegant Gala is perhaps the only annual event that upstages Meadowood's many stellar, on-property recreational diversions such as their new luxe spa, first-class tennis facilities, swimming, hiking, destination-worthy dining, and their renowned croquet court.



Castello di Amorosa. Photo credit: Paul E. Richardson



Castello di Amorosa. Photo credit: Susana Bates



Meadowood Napa Valley. Photo credit: Bob McClenahan

Held on the expansive fairway lawn, the Gala attracted a who's who list of summer-white-bedecked guests, who enjoyed assorted Napa wines and dinner prepared by Meadowood's estate chef Alejandro Ayala, all while participating in a spirited fundraising auction - featuring extravagant lots - to benefit Festival Napa Valley's celebrated Arts for All initiative. Example: LOT 1 - WALK THE RED WEINSTEIN CARPET: Invitation for two to the Weinstein Company Golden Globes Viewing Party and Dinner, invitation for two to the Weinstein Company Golden Globes After-Party, two-night luxury accommodations in Los Angeles, white-glove service via Tesla to and from Weinstein Golden Globe events, host a private and exclusive pre-release screening of a Weinstein film for 25 people at a theater near your home, invitation for two to a Weinstein Company red carpet prerelease screening in Los Angeles or New York, and two signed magnums of Alpha Omega wine.



Festival Gala Meadowood. Photo credit: Paul E. Richardson



Grgich Hills. Photo credit: Paul E. Richardson

Grgich Hills Estates hosted a Judgment of Paris 40th Anniversary Luncheon, where guests toasted Napa's victory at the historic 1976 blind tasting that pitted high quality French red Bordeaux and white Burgundies against California Cabernet Sauvignons and Chardonnays. California's victory at the time was inconceivable, and set the stage for even greater Napa wines to come.

Cuban pianist Aldo Lopez Gavilan, soprano Kathleen Battle, jazz legend Sergio Mendes, baritone Lester Lynch, the Young People's Chorus of New York City, violinist Sarah Chang, and the San Francisco Ballet -accompanied by members of the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra – all commanded various stages throughout the Valley during the 10-day program.



Aldo Lopez-Gavilan. Photo credit: Paul E. Richardson

After parties, each more elegant and amusing than the next, were hosted by Hall Wines, Charlie Palmer of St. Helena's beautiful Harvest Inn, the Hess Collection, The Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, and at Rutherford's Alpha Omega where owners Robin and Michelle Baggett hosted Mendes and his wife Gracinha Leporace at their always popular down-home Patron Dinner. Baggett, an executive board member of Festival Napa Valley, wheeled out an entire pig that he personally smoked for his guests, all of whom also feasted on Baggett's "almost famous" BBQ ribs, baked beans and slaw while enjoying Alpha Omega's world class wines. The festive evening was highlighted by a surprise performance by legendary fiddler/violinist Mark O'Connor, who seemingly stood on water thanks to a dramatic dry ice illusion.



Alpha Omega. Photo credit: Bob McClenahan



Tribute to Magrit Mondavi. Photo credit: Susana Bates

Margrit Mondavi, this season's honoree, was feted at a Far Niente Winery-hosted tribute with a feast prepared by celebrity chef Lidia Bastianich. Jazz saxophonist Dave Koz serenaded the crowd, which included special guests Sophia Lauren and her son orchestral conductor Carlo Ponti, Jr. The festivities closed with a luxe dinner at Robert Mondavi Winery that was preceded by an Opera Gala conducted by Ponti, and featuring Isabel Leonard and Michael Fabiano.

For advanced purchase tickets to Festival Napa Valley 2017, visit www.festivalnapavalley.org.