

How Auction Napa Valley Attracts Star Chefs

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Courtesy Auction Napa Valley

Auction visitors could bid on a private wine tour of the Baldacci vineyards, pictured.

Vintners, chefs, and enthusiasts descend on Napa Valley every year to see the most exciting offerings in food and wine—and raise money for charity.

For those hungry for celebrity sightings, this year's Auction Napa Valley was the place to be: Early Friday, there was actress Courteney Cox rushing past all the stalls offering top-flight vintages to get to her favorite, Silver Oak (the vineyard's lot "Dinner with Friends," featuring a wine-paired supper with Cox, went for \$170,000 the next day); and late Saturday night, you could spot Kate Upton breaking it down on the dance floor to a 30-piece Cuban band. But throughout the three-day event, the spotlight was focused squarely on the real stars—the chefs and winemakers, and even more so, the food and wine. Consisting of an array of wine-soaked dinners and after parties, a barrel auction, and live auction, [Auction Napa Valley](#), organized by the Napa Valley Vintners, has raised more than \$150 million for area nonprofits since its inception in 1981. Now in its 36th year, the event, which features an international mix of enthusiasts bidding on everything from exotic trips ([Tuscany](#), [South Africa](#)) to custom jewelry and rare vintages, has emerged as something more: one of the nation's preeminent wine event for foodies—and vice versa. "With so many talented and established winemakers, you feel challenged to match the quality and the history with your cooking," says Francis Mallmann, the Argentinian chef who prepared a special Patagonian barbecue feast for the weekend's celebration. "At this point, Napa is as famed internationally for its dining as it is for its wines."

This year's edition, which ran from June 2-5, started with the area vintners' opening their wineries for a variety of welcome parties. Everything kicked into high gear on Friday, with the barrel auction, where the grounds of the [Robert Mondavi Winery](#) in Oakville turned into a sea of tech execs in gingham shirts and Bay Area society women in broad-brimmed sun hats, all savoring tuna tartare tacos made by Iron Chef [Masaharu Morimoto](#). Inside the winery, among massive fermentation vats, dozens of the area's best winemakers doled out tastes of young, still-in-the-oak vintages—the vast majority, 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon. Die hard bidders circled with Sommelier necklaces, as flat screen TVs tracked the bidding (some ten-case lots went for upwards of \$60,000, or more than \$500 a bottle before even being bottled). In the evening, the one-upmanship continued, with top wineries across the valley hosting lavish dinner parties, bringing in Michelin-starred chefs like Ken Frank (of [La Toque](#)), Thomas Keller, and Christopher Kostow.

The next day, auction-goers poured out of Teslas at the [Meadowood](#) resort for the main event, the live charity auction. They were met with a massive raw bar under an open tent and a welcome reception hosted by Kostow, the chef of [The Restaurant at Meadowood](#), who offered guests Dom Perignon and cans of PBR. Outside, Mallmann's dinner preparation was on display on the dug up golf green, as cuts of meat hung over open embers and salmon fillets were buried in salt with fresh grape leaves and red-hot stones. As guests filtered into the massive auction tent, each winery hosted a table and poured liberally from a selection of reserve wines (1973 Inglenook Cabernet, anyone?) By the end, the glittery event took in a total of \$14.3 million for local community health and children's education organizations. One of the biggest sellers was the Mondavi winery's "50 Years, 50 Guests, 50 Bottles"—which included dinner for the winner and 49 of his or her closest friends at the [French Laundry](#)—which went for \$520,000, providing the closing statement in a weekend where fine dining and choice wine complemented each other perfectly.

THE NAPA WINES TO KNOW RIGHT NOW

Picks from the stars of wine and food stars of Auction Napa Valley:

Charlie Palmer, James Beard Award-Winning Chef:

"I just had the [Alpha Omega 2014 ERA Cab](#) and was blown away. The wine's incredibly dynamic and for those that haven't been there, it's a pretty impressive facility for such a small producer," says Palmer, who raved about the barrel auction lots. "I'm a big Pinot guy, so I'd definitely go for that [Saintsbury Pinot Noir](#) as well." He also reunited with a favorite being poured at the tasting stands: "On the white side, I'm a [Twomey Sauvignon Blanc](#) guy. Easy to drink with just the right amount of fruit and acid. Great for summer."

Brittany Hastings, Estate Sommelier at Meadowood Napa Valley:

"I thought [The Mascot](#), by Will Harlan, had an incredible showing," says Hastings, who was also thrilled by the offerings at the barrel auction. "A blend of young vines, some of the most highly sought after fruit and made by an exceptional team. Another one that stood out to me was [Vice Versa](#)." Visiting tasting stands over the course of the weekend, she discovered some other gems. "I had the opportunity to try [Diamond Creek Red Rock Terrace](#) out of a magnum," Hastings says. "What a delicious and well-integrated wine! I was surprised at how beautiful this was drinking in its youth."

Cindy Pawlcyn, James Beard Award-Winning Chef:

Pawlcyn, too, was taken with the hit of the barrel auction: “I was surprised by the **2014 The Mascot**,” she says. “And also the **2013 Ovid Hexameter**—it wasn’t in the barrel auction but poured at their wine station.” But the barrel she bid on was a highly drinkable wine with a personal connection: Lang & Reed’s **2014 Cabernet Franc Les Loges**. “Vintner John Skupny is a longtime friend from Minnesota and I have always loved the wines they make.”

Masaharu Morimoto, Michelin Star-Winning Chef:

“It is hard to pick just one. There was simply not a wine I wouldn’t bid on,” Morimoto says, though he can’t resist citing a few true standouts: “Cabernet Sauvignon legends such as **Continuum** by Tim Mondavi, **Melka** by Philippe Melka or **Blackbird Vineyards** by Aaron Pott and the up and coming and exciting wines of **The Mascot** by Will and Amanda Harlan and **Modus Operandi** by Jason Moore.” For drinking on a warm summer day, his tastes tended toward white: “**Judd’s Hill Sauvignon Blanc** and **Vineyard 29 Sauvignon Blanc** were the most surprising and refreshing and two wines that match the excitement of my cuisine.”

Francis Mallmann, Michelin Star-Winning Chef:

“I am interested in opposition and the collision of great flavors—great food and great wine—so to me, wine pairings are simplistic, they’re for toddlers. As adults we know what we like,” Mallmann says as a caveat. “Everyone raves about the Cabs from Napa, and that is justifiable. But I am interested in Napa winemakers’ Zinfandel. It’s making a very strong statement as it is coming back into favor. I enjoyed the **Peju Zinfandel** quite a bit. And I will be trying others.”