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2017 Premiere Napa Valley raises \$4.2 million

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Anne Ward Ernst, Weekly Calistogan

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Auctioneer Fritz Hatton works the crowd during bidding for Alpha Omega's 2015 cabernet sauvignon from the Dr. Crane and To Kalon vineyards.

Premiere Napa Valley, the Napa Valley Vintners' barrel tasting and futures auction, raised \$4.2 million on Saturday at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone.

Auctioneers Fritz Hatton and Ursula Hermacinski sold 172 lots, mostly cabernet sauvignon from the 2015 vintage, for some \$3.7 million. An additional 43 Napa Valley wines were sold online for nearly \$500,000.

Last year's auction for the trade raised \$5 million, while the auctions in 2015 and 2014 each raised about \$6 million. The 2017 auction was the fourth-highest amount raised in the 21 years of Premiere Napa Valley.

"We're thrilled with the outcome of this year's Premiere Napa Valley," said Michael Honig, chair of the NVV board of directors and president of Honig Vineyard & Winery. "It's been more than 20 years since the NVV created America's first barrel futures tasting and auction for the trade. As the industry leader, we cannot rest on our longstanding success. We want the Premiere Napa Valley brand to be coveted around the world. Our purposeful, strategic decision to sell more of this year's lots exclusively online was a major step toward achieving this goal."

The top lot of the afternoon auction, Scarecrow Wines' 2014 cabernet sauvignon, sold for \$200,000. Hermacinski started the bidding at \$50,000, which would have been enough to buy many of the wines in the auction, and the bidding quickly climbed to \$100,000, then zoomed to \$190,000. At that point, it was clear that two sets of bidders wanted it, Pierre-Yves Robin and Melissa Devore of Total Wines and More from Bethesda, Md., and Jay Flatley and Dustin Cano of Meritage Wine Market in Encinitas.

After the bidding reached \$190,000, Hermacinski said, "You could have set it at this mark in the beginning and saved me all this work." Then she told the crowd, "Don't point your cameras at me, point them at the bidders," which brought on cheering and clapping.

The bid went to \$195,000, eliciting another round of cheering and clapping, then \$197,000 and then \$199,000, which is when Hermacinski said, "I know exactly where this is going." The team from Bethesda bid another \$1,000 and the atmosphere in the room was electric. The auctioneer then asked, "Where are the people who bought Arkenstone, do you have any money left?" They didn't and she slammed the hammer down amidst the cheering crowd.

\$3.5 million raised

At that point auctioneers Fritz Hatton and Hermacinski had sold 158 of the 172 wines and raised an estimated \$3.5 million on the live auction.

Two other lots raised the crowd's interest, each selling for \$100,000: the Alpha Omega 2015 cabernet sauvignon made by Jean Hoefliger with grapes from two world-renowned vineyards: Beckstoffer Dr. Crane and Beckstoffer To Kalon.

Hatton started that lot at \$25,000 and the bidding quickly went to \$55,000, where it seemed to stall. Hatton warned the bidders, "You're going to miss it, what is wrong with six figures?" The bidding started anew and the five cases sold for \$100,000 to John Wade of Cliffwood Wine Syndicate in Little Rock, Ark. After buying the wine, he said he and his partners (Chris Tanner and Joe Pascale) bought the wine for their own cellars, adding they have known Alpha Omega's owners, Robin and Michelle Baggett, for a long time.

At his after-party, held at his Rutherford estate, Robin Baggett said, "We're very honored and pleased to be recognized by the trade and proud of the accomplishments of our winemaker, Jean Hoefliger, and our winemaking team."

Hoefliger said what makes the 2015 vintage of Dr. Crane To Kalon special is the tannins, which "were definitely part of the equation. You were able to get the silkiness from Dr. Crane and the structure from To Kalon."

The winery's previous PNV record was \$55,000, also for five cases, of 2013 Dr. Crane To Kalon cabernet sauvignon.

Interestingly enough, there was only one bid for the 2015 cabernet sauvignon from Arkenstone Vineyards. The members of Napa Wine Ltd. from Zurich, Switzerland, yelled out \$100,000 as Hatton opened the bidding. The room was fairly quiet when Hatton asked, "Anyone else want to take aim at this bid?" No one did and he slammed down the hammer.

The members of the Napa Wine Ltd. are Gregor Greber, Bernhard Signorelli, Michael Otte and Martin Schneider. Last year they paid \$130,000 for five cases of 2014 Memento Mori cabernet sauvignon, made from grapes grown in Beckstoffer Dr. Crane Vineyard and Las Piedras Vineyard, both in St. Helena. It was one of the three top lots in the 2016 PNV auction.

Scarecrow at PNV

This is the third time the barrel auction for the trade has seen the cabernet sauvignon from Scarecrow. A lot of five cases was sold in 2011 for \$125,000, and in 2014 Glen Knight from The Wine House in Los Angeles paid a record amount of \$260,000 for 60 bottles of 2012 cabernet sauvignon from Scarecrow.

On Saturday morning, when all 217 barrel lots were available for tasting at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, winemaker Celia Welch talked about the Scarecrow wine that she made, which spent an extra seven months in barrels. "I told (owner Bret Lopez) when I first tasted this I'm hoping that he never asks me to make a better wine than this one, because I don't know if I can ever make anything as really remarkable and indicative of this place as this vintage. It's a lot of fun to share this today."

The wine was made from a block in the J.J. Cohen Vineyards in Rutherford. Its vines were planted in 1945 on St. George rootstock, which is resistant to phylloxera.

"We track each of those vines individually. Before we harvest, we taste each one of those individual vines," Welch said adding that the vines are very special and very fragile. There are about 430 of these "Old Men" vines and the yield is about a half a ton, which makes two barrels, one of which is created for Premiere Napa Valley.

Is she surprised at the amount people paid for their PNV lot in 2014? "Absolutely," Welch said. "I hardly even remember the end of that auction, because I was overwhelmed with the reception that wine brought. It was exciting and beyond anything we were expecting."

Hours before the auction, Welch was not about to predict what the 2017 lot would sell for. "I am pleased to have shared this really special piece of Napa Valley with so many people who represent the Napa Valley and with the rest of the country and around the world. This is a piece of Napa history and to be able to have that preserved, cared for by Bret Lopez and Mimi DeBlasio, is just as much of a dream as I can have. The money is not the point; it is being able to show people what the Napa Valley can do."

Group buys Schramsberg lot

Jim Cox from Southern Napa Fine Wine House in Daphne, Ala., was one of the bidders at the 2017 PNV. He said he has a group of clients who pool their money together and they send him to PNV to buy something he really likes. This year, he paid \$24,000 for five cases of J. Schram Late Disgorged Sparkling Wine, vintage 1996, from Schramsberg Vineyards.

Three years ago, during his first year at PNV, he bought the Davies' red wine lot. This year he also bought two online lots, from Anthem and Rocca and also five cases of the Gamble Family Vineyards 2015 cabernet sauvignon for \$10,000.

Each of the lots, either five cases, 10 cases or 20 cases, are created specifically for Premiere Napa Valley and are available nowhere else. Of the 217 lots sold, 189, or 87 percent, were from the 2015 vintage.

Speaking about the 2015 wines, Michael Osborn, founder of Wine.com, said, "The wines we tasted from the 2015 vintage were extraordinary. Although the harvest was smaller, that seems to have paid off in terms of quality for Napa Valley. From hillside wines to those from the valley floor, everything we tasted from this vintage was truly great."

St. Helenan Stefan Blicher and his business partner, Corey Wagner, were both at PNV tasting the barrel samples. Blicher said the 2015 vintage reminds him of the powerful 2013 "with the volume turned down a bit and I mean that in a really good way. There's a bit less chunky tannin, a bit less upfront ripeness, but serious concentration and depth with pretty excellent balance across the board. I feel like it will be a vintage that will take longer to develop but will be extremely satisfying in the long run (like 20 to 30 years). It's always tough to generalize a vintage with so many varied terroirs and winemaking styles that we enjoy, but that's my first impression."

Blicher first moved to the Napa Valley when he went to work for Merryvale in 1997 and has attended all 21 Premieres Napa Valley.

"From a trade standpoint, Premiere is the most comprehensive way to get a very, very good look at the vintage for the first time," he said. "By the end of Premiere, when you've tasted 150 to 200 wines, you have a very good sense of what the overall vintage is for the Napa Valley. I really can't think of anything as comprehensive anywhere in the world. Premiere gives you the ability to grasp an entire vintage in literally three days."

Top 2017 PNV lots

\$200,000 Scarecrow, 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon

\$100,000 Alpha Omega, 2015 CS

\$100,000 Arkenstone Vineyards, 2015 CS

\$80,000 Silver Oak Cellars, 2015 red wine

\$70,000 Robert Mondavi Winery, 2015 red wine

\$55,000 Honig Vineyard & Winery, 2015 CS

\$55,000 Rombauer Vineyards, 2015 CS

David Stoneberg

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