

# Roasting Meat, Fevered Bidding and Kate Upton: Auction Napa Valley Raises \$14.3 Million for Charity

In its 36th year, the Napa Valley Vintners' event continues to be the nation's top charity wine auction



Robin Baggett of Alpha Omega thanks the bidder who won his winery's "World of Wonder" lot.

Photo by: Briana Marie Photography

Aaron Romano Posted: June 6, 2016

The guests at Auction Napa Valley expected to be greeted with a glass of wine when they entered the grounds at Meadowood Resort for Saturday night's live auction. They did not expect the enticing aromas of Francis Mallmann's primal cooking presentation. The famed Argentinian chef had hung whole chickens and hunks of prime rib from domes of metal bars atop circular pits. Nearly half a ton of vegetables lay hidden in a pit lined with hot stones or roasting underneath hot embers and ashes. Before the first paddle was raised at one of America's landmark charity wine events, there was palpable excitement in the air.

The auction, in its 36th year, was the capstone to a weekend of fundraising events put on by the Napa Valley Vintners (NVV)—four days that brought in \$14.3 million for local nonprofits focused on community health and children's education. Though that's less than last year's mark of \$15.8 million and 2014's record \$18.7 million, the event continues to be the nation's top charity wine event. Since its inception in 1981, Auction Napa Valley has given more than \$150 million to charities.

"It's unbelievable to see how far our wine industry has come in the past 50 years," said Marcia Mondavi Borger of Continuum, whose father Robert Mondavi helped found the event. "The Auction has made life in Napa better for so many people who need help, and I think it speaks to the values of the community. They were here at the beginning, and though we may be a little more glitzy now, they're still strong today."

Inside the auction tent, Chef Mallmann took to the stage for a few words, while piping hot empanadas were passed as a teaser for the dinner to come. Mallmann called the rowdy crowd of 900 "romantic, passionate soldiers of wine and food," and urged them to be handsome with their bids.

And handsome they were. It took no time for paddles to start rising. The first lot was from Quintessa, the winery of honorary auction chairman Agustin F. Huneus Jr., offering a 12-liter bottle and 20 hand-etched 750ml bottles, dinner and entertainment for 20 at Quintessa, plus private VIP wine tastings for eight during the lifetime of the bidder. The Huneus family offered to match the highest bid, and just like that \$680,000 was on the books.

Leading all lots was Staglin Family Vineyard's "Into Africa" lot, which included an all-expenses-paid adventure for two couples in South Africa, complete with guided tours, a boat ride to visit Nelson Mandela's prison cell on Robben Island, winery visits, VIP dinners, a four-day safari, and, of course, wine. Initially selling for \$750,000, the lot garnered \$1.05 million after it was expanded to include three couples instead of two.

Other hot lots included Amuse Bouche Winery and Tusk Estates' "True Warriors of Wine," which offered a Golden State Warriors Championship ring from last year, signed jerseys from the starting five players, VIP courtside tickets and dinner with the winery's proprietors. When model and actress Kate Upton stood up and offered to accompany the winning bidder to the game if they would double their pledge, the lot quickly brought in \$1.04 million.

And Robert Mondavi Winery's "50 Years, 50 Guests, 50 Bottles," celebrating the winery's 50th year, included 50 bottles of wine and dinner for 50 at the French Laundry. Prior to bidding, auctioneer Fritz Hatton led the crowd in singing "for she's a wonderful lady" to the tune of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" to Margrit Mondavi, who was seated at a front table, as she was presented with white roses. The bidding finished at \$520,000.

#### **Four Days of Fun for a Cause**

The festivities kicked off on Thursday night, with welcome parties at various wineries. Friday's barrel auction and marketplace took place on the grounds of Robert Mondavi Winery, where a crowd of nearly 2,000 endured scorching hot temperatures for the opportunity to sample barrel lots from more than 100 wineries, as well as indulge in an array of noshes from dozens of Napa Valley chefs and purveyors. A brunch at Inglenook on Sunday closed out the event.

Winemaker Philippe Melka, whose barrel was the top seller at Friday's barrel auction, was a popular face in the crowd Saturday, his forehead and cheeks adorned with red lipstick imprints from affectionate fans. "This is a fabulous, positive event, and there's nothing like this in the world," he said, as another winning bid was announced, followed by an explosion of red confetti that showered nearby guests.

Juan Mercado, founder of Realm Cellars, was there to watch his winery's first live auction lot go on the block. "I don't know what to expect, but I'm very excited," he said. Realm's lot—three 9-liter bottles—hailed in \$210,000.

A few celebrities attended this year's events, most notably Courteney Cox, who made an appearance at Friday's barrel auction as part of Silver Oak's auction lot, "Dinner with Friends," which included an evening of food and wine for eight, co-hosted by Cox and Silver Oak and Twomey Cellars' CEO David Duncan and Dr. Kary Duncan.

There were fewer live auction lots this year, numbering only 36 in comparison to last year's 51. That, combined with speedy bidding, allowed the auction to finish within three hours. Guests settled in for a dinner of Mallmann's food, while Huneus thanked everyone involved and revived the traditional passing of the golden paddle to the next auction chair, handing it off to Eleanor Coppola, representing Inglenook.

Huneus excitedly reminded people to head back into the tent after dinner for the after-party. A 30-piece Cuban band, Los Van Van, finished off the evening, keeping everyone dancing well into the night.

### **Top Eight Auction Lots**

Fund-a-Need: \$2.1 million

One hundred paddle-holders bid in various increments. Barbara Banke of Jackson Family Wines was the top bidder, donating \$500,000.

### **Into Africa, Incomparably: \$1.05 million**

Donated by Staglin Family Vineyards. All-expenses-paid adventure for two couples to South Africa, complete with guided tours, a boat ride to visit the former president Nelson Mandela's prison cell on Robben Island, winery visits, VIP dinners, a four-day safari, and wine. Sold for \$700,000 and expanded to include an additional couple, for a fundraising total of \$1.05 million.

### **True Warriors of Wine: \$1.04 million**

Donated by Amuse Bouche and Tusk Estates. Includes a Golden State Warriors Championship ring from last year, signed jerseys from the starting five players, VIP courtside tickets, 10 bottles of wine and dinner with the winery's proprietors. Taking in the game with Kate Upton was a bonus.

### **The Quintessential Vintner Experience: \$680,000**

Donated by Quintessa. A 12-liter bottle and 20 hand-etched 750ml bottles, dinner and entertainment for 20 at Quintessa, plus private VIP wine tastings for eight during the lifetime of the bidder. Sold for \$170,000, was doubled and then matched by the Huneus family for a fundraising total of \$680,000.

A Night Full of Stars: \$660,000

A buy-a-spot lot donated by Opus One. An invitation to attend the Opus One pre-auction gala dinner party, which will include vintages of Opus One wine from the '80s, '90s and 2000s, as well as a magnum of Opus for each bidder.

50 Years, 50 Guests, 50 Bottles: \$520,000

Donated by Robert Mondavi Winery. Fifty bottles of Mondavi wine and dinner for 50 at the French Laundry restaurant. Etched Into the Hillside: \$500,000

Donated by Harlan Estate. Five 3-liter bottles from the estate's top vintages as well as a private tour and bespoke meal for eight at Harlan Estate.

Luminosity: \$440,000

Donated by Scarecrow Wine. Dinner for four with Chopard Watches Co-President and Creative Director Caroline Scheufele, paired with Scarecrow wines. Private viewing of Chopard's Haute Joillerie Red Carpet Collection for four. Chopard merchandise credit up to \$20,000 per couple. Pre-and post-Oscar party for four, with premium Oscar viewing included.

The Grand Heist: \$360,000

Donated by Blackbird Vineyards and Bulgari. Sold for \$180,000 and was then doubled for a fundraising total of \$360,000. Includes accommodations and transportation in Switzerland and tours at three Bulgari watchmaking workshops.

Rooms with a View: \$320,000

Donated by Antica Napa Valley–Antinori Family Wine Estate. Three nights in Florence, two nights in Chianti Classico, two nights in Bolgheri and one night in Umbria, with numerous tours and dinners included. Additionally, two nights in Napa Valley, with custom wine-blending session with Antica's winemaker, as well as 240 bottles of wine.