

# American Vinanthropy

Across the country, vintner donors and affluent auction bidders are raising millions for charitable causes...proving that wine is good for the heart in more ways than one.

BY JANICE FUHRMAN

**D**on Gunther, a 69-year-old former executive with the engineering conglomerate the Bechtel Group, sat, teary-eyed, in a small auditorium in southwest Florida. He was listening as a poised young girl talked about how she would be the first from her migrant working family to graduate from high school. And soon, she added, the first to enter college.

He turned to the person next to him and motioned to the girl onstage. "We helped do that," he said. Gunther, tan and hearty, lives the good life in one of the country's richest communities—Naples, Florida. He was referring to the 69 trustees of the Naples Children & Education Foundation, who since 2001 have produced the annual Naples Winter Wine Festival, raising nearly \$75 million for local children's charities. Without a local wine industry to promote—or to back them up—a group of wealthy, wine and food-loving Naples residents banded together to create an event that has since rocketed to top-earner status among U.S. charity wine auctions.

"Naples is able to draw upon a very well-connected, affluent, and most of all generous and caring group of local people who are able to bring like-minded people to Naples for the auction," says Napa vintner Ann Colgin, a Naples donor and auctioneer who ran Sotheby's west coast wine department in the mid-1990s. To lure those who attract well-heeled bidders, the organizers of the Naples auction offer rock star treatment to top producers. Vintners like Bill Harlan of Harlan Estate, John Shafer of Napa's Shafer Vineyards and Aubert de Villaine of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti are flown in on private jets and put up at Naples' luxurious Ritz-Carlton resort. "They treat us like royalty" says Shafer, who has attended several times.

And, "once we got wines like Harlan, Screaming Eagle and Colgin, the whole world of celebrity chefs opened up to us," says J.D. Clinton, a banker who along with Gunther was instrumental in founding the Naples auction. "So many people in this industry care and are truly gen-

erous, and when you're all sincerely working for a good cause, it works."

You might call it "vinanthropy"—the widespread practice of using wine to generate millions of dollars for charitable causes across the country. Special, top-scoring bottles, wine country trips and insider access with vintners are the shiny trophies at wine auctions that attract these big bucks. And while Naples and its predecessor, Auction Napa Valley, might be the headline makers—with totals such as \$10 or \$16 million in one afternoon's work—there are countless wine auctions and fundraiser dinners from places as far-flung as Sun Valley, Idaho; Destin, Florida; and Walla Walla, Washington, that produce funds for causes as diverse as mental health research, AIDS treatment in Africa, unearthing land mines in war-torn countries and—closer to home—supporting local hospitals, children's programs, animal shelters and food banks.

## A Natural Partnership

Peter Michael, a British citizen who owns Peter Michael Winery in Sonoma, says giving to charity is "built into the American psyche." What is it about the wine industry in particular though that accounts for so much giving? According to Shafer, the small-scale nature of wineries has a lot to do with it. "I believe that something like 80% of giving is done from individuals, not corporations, and most wineries are family-owned and more apt to be sympathetic to requests."

The wine lifestyle and all its attendant associations is also well-suited for the charity circuit. Wine is seen as a pleasurable, sought-after commodity that brings people together. When vintner donors and affluent bidders gather across the country to imbibe and collect, it's a recipe for philanthropic success. Shari Staglin of Napa's Staglin Family Vineyards argues that wine and philanthropy are a "natural partnership. With philanthropy you need to entertain people so they feel good about what they're giving. If they're having great wine and food, that makes them feel happy. Pretzels and beer are not gonna do it." Adds her husband,



Garen, "It works both ways. Wineries want to do charitable events not only to satisfy their individual passions and causes, but also for the exposure to potential customers."

Indeed, the benevolent mother of all U.S. charity wine auctions, Auction Napa Valley, was conceived in 1981 as a platform for promoting Napa wines, as well as generating the goodwill that comes from supporting local charities. "It was good exposure for a young industry that hadn't quite taken off yet," says vintner Janet Trefethen of Trefethen Vineyards. The Napa auction has produced more money than any charity wine auction in the world—some \$85 million over 28 years—through its annual four-day celebration, now benefiting the county's two hospitals, a low-cost health clinic that serves farm workers and their families, a hospice and a dental clinic, among many other local recipients.

"Wine auctions are a 'feel-good' because you are helping others, but to be blunt, from a business standpoint it can be a very good promotion," says Greg Lill, of Washington's DeLille Cellars. Lill has twice chaired the annual Auction of Washington Wines, the state's largest wine auction, which has raised over \$21 million for the Seattle Children's Hospital.

Clockwise from left: Youthful exuberance at the Naples Winter Wine Festival; John Shafer at Napa's Vintners Community Health Center; actress Fran Drescher and Napa Vintner Janet Trefethen.

## Local Benefits

The Napa Valley Vintners Association, the trade association that sponsors the Napa Valley Auction, ensures that the county reaps tremendous benefits from the auction. Referring to the local Queen of the Valley Hospital, Trefethen, believes that "they would not have the facility they have today nor attract the quality of staff they do without this support from the vintner auction. It's a good place to get sick—if you have to."

A good place, too, if you don't earn enough to pay for health insurance. Clinic Ole, a pet project of Shafer's since 1989, is the only non-profit health center in Napa County, and provides affordable medical and dental care to low-income, uninsured residents. Its building was financed in part by a \$3 million donation from auction proceeds. "These people who don't have the wherewithal are the people who we in the valley depend on. They're not only picking our grapes, they're working in our wineries," says Shafer. The father of Shafer Vineyards' longtime



winemaker, Elias Fernandez, was once a field worker.

In Oregon, the annual Pinot Noir barrel auction ¡Salud! funds an effort of winemakers and medical professionals to provide health education and health care to vineyard workers and their families—specific projects include setting up mobile screening clinics within the vineyards. Funding—over \$6 million since 1993—comes from bidding on new vintages of Pinot Noir from the state's top wineries, who each contribute a custom cuvée. Maria McCandless, the director of the program, says the relationship between vintners and physicians on behalf of the seasonal workers is unique to Oregon. "No other state in the country has such an effective and far-reaching program to support the seasonal worker population. Each dollar spent returns over \$3 in goods and services."

### Global Causes

Although much of the charitable focus of wineries is local, many have far-reaching interests. A different kind of wine event, held each year in the heart of the Napa Valley, is the Staglin Music Festival for Mental Health, which has been underwritten by Staglin Family Vineyards. As a young adult, the Staglin's son was diagnosed with schizophrenia. "We decided we could run away from the problem or run towards it," says Garen Staglin. He and his wife chose to dedicate themselves to raising money for mental health research through an annual music festival and

Left to right: Bidders at the Destin (FL) Wine Auction, benefiting children's charities; Bill Harlan with Staglin Music Festival bidders Mary-Louise and Bob Maier; Cal Ripken Jr. with Naples auction trustee Don Gunther.

PHOTO CENTER TOM HARPER

Clockwise: Ann Colgin with husband Joe Wender at Auction Napa Valley; Ann with Auction attendees Jerry O'Connell and Sandra Rapke; bidders at the Napa auction; Garen and Shari Staglin at the Staglin Music Festival; Mary Rocca in Malawi, working on behalf of the Grigsby-Rocca Foundation.

dinner, whose proceeds are donated to 18 international research project that focus on depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. The music festival is a unique blend of wine, food, music and science—a symposium featuring the leading mental health scientists of the world is part of the program—and has leveraged \$87 million since 1996.

Barbara Bryant, co-founder of Bryant Family Vineyards in Napa Valley, and Sonoma's Peter Michael are two more California vintners raising money for international causes. This fall, Bryant will publish *Bryant Family Vineyard*—which features recipes from culinary stars like Charlie Trotter, Thomas Keller, Daniel Boulud and Lydia Bastianich—the proceeds of which will go to the Bowery Mission in

New York. She's also working on building a library in Rwanda. Largely through the Sir Peter and Lady Michael Foundation's annual Hands & Hearts For Cancer event in New York City, Sir Peter raises \$1 million a year for alternative prostate cancer research both in the U.S. and the U.K.

Marshalling funds, though, is not the only kind of philanthropy vintners are engaged in. Two doctors, Eric Grigsby and Mary Rocca, owners of Rocca Family Vineyards in Napa, have shepherded medical expertise and partnered up with the Mayo Clinic, Grigsby's alma mater, to improve health care in the small African country of Malawi, especially for AIDS patients, through their Grigsby-Rocca Foundation.

from Atlanta who attended the most recent Naples auction. "That's what happens at major wine auctions like Naples or Napa. Leading bidders no doubt decide in advance what they plan to donate in any particular year to the charity, and the rest is fun."

But, in the current downturn, even in the economic stratosphere, people are now prone to restraint. In February, the Naples auction raised \$5 million, a little more than a third of what was produced the previous year and most vintners agree the idling global economy will mean a dip in wine philanthropy for a few years to come. Still, considering the times, the fact that certain lots sold for as much as they did (\$350,000 for a 10-day Caribbean yacht cruise for 12 and \$240,000 for a three-night house party for 10 couples at Tennessee's Blackberry Farm) demonstrates that auctions are in some ways resilient to recessions, with charitable bidding, perhaps seen as one acceptable, socially responsible form of overspending. As Staglin explains, "people don't want to be associated with high-glamour events in this economy unless there is also high efficacy for the projects they're supporting." ■

### THE U.S. WINE CHARITY CIRCUIT

**Auction of Washington Wines, Woodinville, WA:** Aug. 13–15, 2009; [auctionofwashingtonwines.org](http://auctionofwashingtonwines.org)  
**PONCHO Wine Auction, Seattle:** Spring; [poncho.org](http://poncho.org)

**Sun Valley Center for the Arts Wine Auction, Sun Valley, ID:** Jul. 23–25, 2009; [sunvalleycenter.org](http://sunvalleycenter.org)

**Detroit International Wine Auction, Oct. 23–24, 2009;** [collegeofcreativestudies.edu/events](http://collegeofcreativestudies.edu/events)

**"Hope Dream Live!", Chicago:** Sept. 10, 2009; [dhwine.com/content.cfm/events](http://dhwine.com/content.cfm/events)

**Hands & Hearts For Cancer, NYC:** Apr. 30; [petermichaelfoundation.org](http://petermichaelfoundation.org)  
**Rusty Staub Foundation Charity Wine Auction, NYC:** Oct. 8, 2009; [rustystaub-foundation@karlitz.com](mailto:rustystaub-foundation@karlitz.com)  
**Itzhak Perlman Wine Dinner, NYC:** 2010 date TBD; [perlmannmusicprogram.org](http://perlmannmusicprogram.org)

**L' Été du Vin, Nashville, TN:** 2010 date TBD; [nashvillewineauction.com](http://nashvillewineauction.com)

**The High Museum Atlanta Wine Auction, Atlanta:** Mar. 25–27, 2010; [atlantawineauction.org](http://atlantawineauction.org)

**¡Salud! The Oregon Pinot Noir Auction, Willamette Valley and Portland:** Nov. 13–14, 2009; [saludauction.org/saludauction](http://saludauction.org/saludauction)  
**Classic Wine Auction, Portland:** Mar. 7, 2009; [classicwinesauction.com](http://classicwinesauction.com)

**Auction Napa Valley, Street, Helena, CA:** Jun. 4–7, 2009; [napavintners.com/avnv](http://napavintners.com/avnv)  
**Bogart Wine Aficionado Dinner (benefiting the Bogart Pediatric Cancer Research Program), Los Angeles:** May 14, 2009; [bogartfoundation.org](http://bogartfoundation.org)  
**Napa Pain Conference with Neuromodulation and Wine, Napa:** Aug. 14–16, 2009; [napapainconference.com](http://napapainconference.com)  
**Sonoma Wine Country Weekend:** Sept. 4–6, 2009; various Sonoma County venues; [sonomawinecountryweekend.com](http://sonomawinecountryweekend.com)  
**Sonoma Paradise, Sonoma County:** 2010 date TBA; [sonomaparadiso.com](http://sonomaparadiso.com)  
**Music Festival for Mental Health, Rutherford, CA:** Sept. 12, 2009; [musicfestival.org](http://musicfestival.org)  
**Winesong!, Fort Bragg, CA:** Sept. 11–12, 2009; [winesong.org](http://winesong.org)

**Jackson Hole Wine Auction, Jackson Hole, WY:** Jun. 27–28; [gtmf.org](http://gtmf.org)

**Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo Wine Auction, 2010 date TBD;** [hlsr.com/ag/ws/ws](http://hlsr.com/ag/ws/ws)

**Naples Winter Wine Festival, Naples, FL:** Jan. 29–31, 2010; [napleswinefestival.com](http://napleswinefestival.com)  
**Destin Charity Wine Auction, Destin, FL:** Apr. 1; [destincharitywineauction.org](http://destincharitywineauction.org)