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bay

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ADVENTUROUS

the interior



on the cover

Biker chic leads the pack in spring fashion trends. Think leather, denim and chains.

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Photograph by Bruce Moyer

DELIGHTS OF SPRING 18

With a nod to spring and Easter, eggs and bunnies bring a smile in charms, purses and whimsical decor.

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Beautiful, elegant Bellagio is nestled invitingly amid the bustling excess of Las Vegas.

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Featuring fine wines, fabulous food and extravagant auction lots, the Naples Winter Wine Festival raises \$12 million to help children.

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An expansive St. Petersburg home is the first house in Pinellas and one of only five in Florida certified Platinum for being green.

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Stellar shopping in luxuriant surroundings awaits coast to coast, in Naples and in Palm Beach.

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Bridal gowns in settings evocative of Great Britain, inspired by the royal wedding this month of Prince William and Kate Middleton.

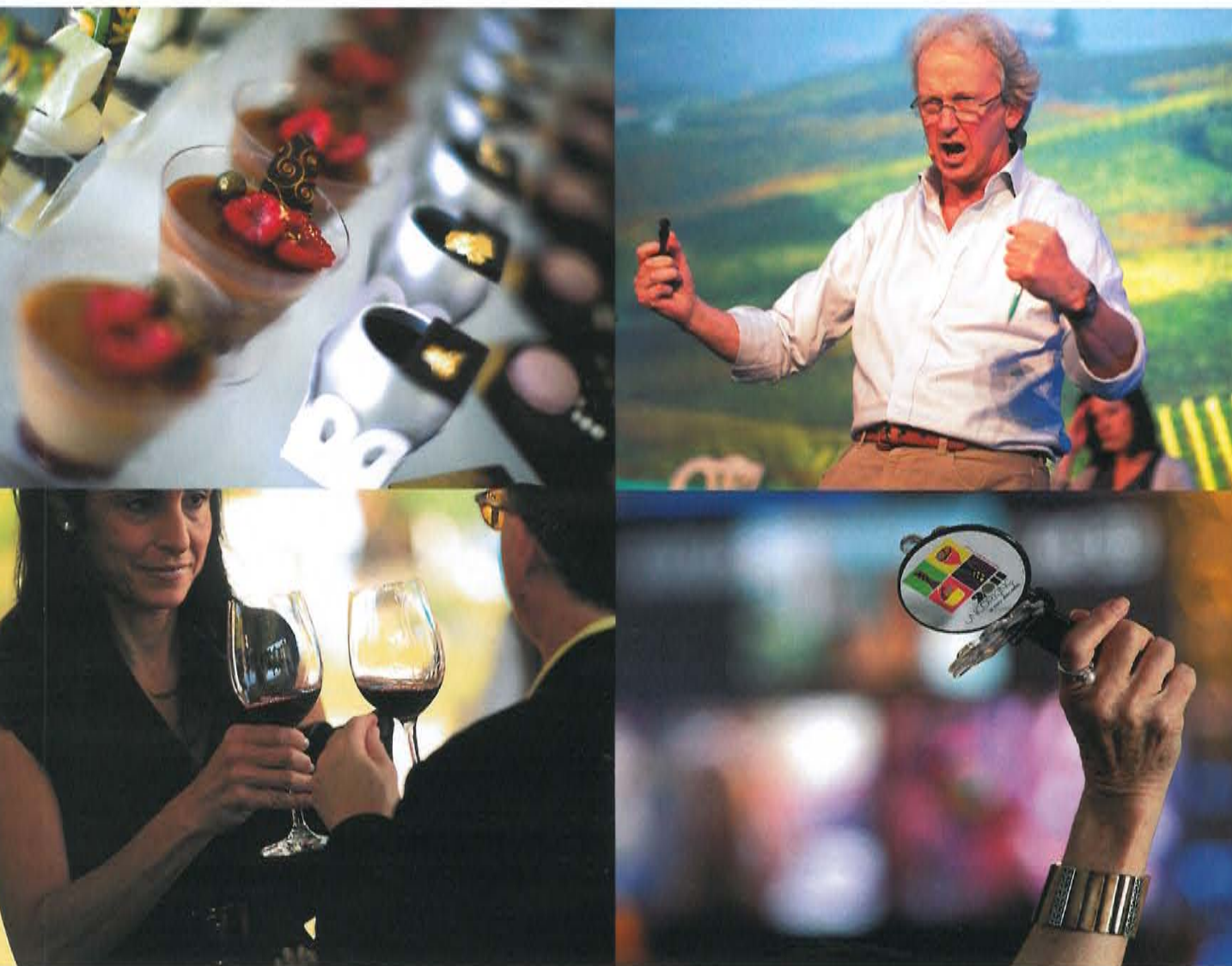
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A Sarasota furniture gallery has evolved into a showcase of contemporary design from around the world.

DESTINATION DESTINY 134

D.T. Minich is essentially director of tourism for Pinellas County. He seems to have been destined for the job; even his name suggests it.

BY CHRIS SHERMAN



IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR

With fine wines from celebrated vintners, fabulous food prepared by notable chefs and extravagant auction lots, the Naples Winter Wine Festival raises \$12 million to benefit children in need.

Clockwise from top left: Desserts are served during the 2011 Naples Winter Wine Festival titled "Uncorking A New Decade" at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort in Naples at the end of January; auctioneer Humphrey Butler encourages bidders at the auction during which 70 lots were auctioned off, including one with a Ferrari and one with a vintage Corvette; a bid is made during the auction; guests drink from a selection of wines.

Photographs by David Albers and Greg Kahn

Once the wine corks, popcorn and glitter were swept away, and the rock stopped blasting, and disco lights flashed their last, the auctioneers counted up \$12 million raised in five hours at the 2011 Naples Winter Wine Festival. That is not a record for a festival that has topped \$15 million, but it is 50 percent more than last year.

The intimate yet rollicking event is the richest wine event on the planet, and the main support of hundreds of children in Collier County who struggle with poverty, abuse, emotional crises and autism.

Credit a crowd of gourmet stars, a happy cast of hundreds backstage and love of fine wines from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (12 bottles, \$80,000) to Shafer Vineyards Hillside Select (a 25-year vertical, \$150,000).

For 11 years, this world-class party (and three-day sleepover at the Ritz-Carlton) has opened big hearts and big wallets of 250 donors from Naples and their guests.

Some are as famous as the wine labels, such as baseball's Rusty Staub and TV's Judge Judy Sheindlin. Food and wine celebrity was endless. Lee Hefter of Spago in Beverly Hills, Gabriel Kreuther of the Modern in New York, and Sean Brock from McCrady's in Charleston came to fix glamorous private dinners paired with the namesake wines of celebrated vintners Daphne and Bart Araujo, Barbara and John Shafer and young Clovis Taittinger.

Haitian-American songwriter Monique Moises, who survived abandonment and years of abuse, performed to a standing ovation. "I refuse to be a statistic," she promised.

Two less famous groups have elevated the Naples fest to the top of the wine world. One is the young beneficiaries, including the hundreds who romped through a balloon-filled gym for Meet the Kids Day.

The other, backstage whenever food,



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naples wine festival CONTINUED



Monte Ahuja kisses his wife, Usha, after winning lot No. 28 — the 2011 Ferrari 458 Italia Sports Coupe — for \$950,000 during the 2011 Naples Winter Wine Festival Auction,

wine and connoisseurs come together, are sommeliers, that little-understood corps of wine professionals. They don't wear flashy tastevins of yore, but they do have long experience and strong opinions that pick wine lists, advise diners and jaw with connoisseurs.

"Take a Burgundy lover (and I'm one) — comes in and wants something on our wine list, but he doesn't know that vintage," explains Heath Porter, the wine director at the storied Greenbrier in West Virginia. He knows that bottle and how it tastes now. Around collectors like the Naples crowd, with deep cellars of old vintages, the key is "knowing when it will be ready."

Porter was one of 40 volunteer sommeliers recruited by Naples wine broker Bruce Nichols. Some are full-time sommeliers traveling with the guest chefs, some restaurateurs and even winemakers like Peter Figge, of Monterey, Calif., and Naples. Wendy LaVoie, who sells the wines of Hess Select of Napa in Florida, has volunteered at the festival every year. "It's a great time, a great cause," she says.

They serve both at the private dinners and the auction, when many donors bring out the best in their cellars for their friends or pick from an all-star table of wines brought by the participating vintners. They open, check and advise on all the bottles.

For Cathy Mantuano, the wine expert at Cafe Spiaggia in Chicago where her husband, Tony, is the chef, her everyday job involves overseeing a stellar Italian wine list and trading wine stories with diners. The Naples event still provides a chance to see many great wines. At the Spiaggia dinner, she served both aged Banfi brunellos and cabernets from O'Shaughnessy, a rising-star vineyard in Napa.

Part of the payoff for the Greenbrier's Porter was experiencing wines new to him. At a dinner with the wines of Viña Tondonia of Rioja, he encountered white Spanish wines from 1992 and '97 that most would think too old. "Incredible power on the finish," he says.

Like everyone else, the volunteer sommeliers ultimately had their eyes on the auction action, where prices leapt \$5,000 at a time and rarely stopped below \$50,000. Thirty bottles of Dominus in Napa fetched \$90,000. A "perfect lot" of 100 wines with 100-point ratings commanded \$400,000. Luxury cars and trips pushed higher to a top \$1 million bid for a massive bronze statue by Spanish sculptor Manolo Valdes.

Even people who know wine at its best, from sommeliers to Christian Moueix, proprietor of Dominus and Chateau Petrus in Pomerol, are amazed by Naples. ○