

Bonfire of the Charities

BOB MORRIS GETS DRUNK ON THE GENEROSITY THAT FLOWS FROM THE WINTER WINE FESTIVAL IN NAPLES, FLORIDA

Charity wine auctions are as common as screw tops these days. Rusty Staub's and Emeril Lagasse's foundations have them. So do Atlanta's High Museum and Sun Valley's Center for the Arts. In Nashville, L'Eté du Vin raises money for the American Cancer Society. In Portland, Oregon, the Classic Wines Auction raises money for Metropolitan Family Services. But in little time, the Naples Winter Wine Festival has become the biggest wine auction in the world, a bottleneck of the world's most important vintners, chefs and connoisseurs that has raised \$69.5 million to benefit local families who face extreme levels of poverty in inland areas and lack any kind of health insurance or pediatric medical care.

How did a seven-year-old, totally locally inspired wine auction on the low-key southwest coast of Florida—just an Everglade away from the ostentatious fundraising antics of Palm Beach and Miami—become a charity wine event to eclipse all others including the renowned auction in Napa Valley, which has been around since 1981?

It's not a long story. But it is a potent one. And like the making of a great wine, it involves everything from terroir and sunshine to patience, perspicacity and timing.

In 2000, a small group of eighteen wealthy Naples friends decided they wanted to raise money for the youth of the community, which has a large population of agricultural and service workers. They envisioned building a beautiful boys and girls club and improving health, social and educational programs for at-risk and underprivileged youth. That summer, the group did some reconnaissance work at Napa's auction, the gold standard at the time. They found it too big—2,000 guests—for bidders to get a chance to mix with vintners and chefs, and decided to make their festival more elite by limiting attendance to 550 and charging \$5,000 a couple, twice what Napa charged. And instead of a massive dinner party under a tent, they'd offer small satellite dinners in private homes with celebrity chefs in kitchens. But how do you get celebrity chefs and vintners to attend a brand new wine festival in an area better known for coconuts than grapes? Cultivation, of course. The wily little Naples crew of CEOs, developers and financial investors set to working their contacts. Word started getting out on the grapevine, as it were. And soon enough, Ann Colgin of Colgin Cellars in Saint Helena, California, stepped up as the festival's first auctioneer. Others took more persuading. So private jets were offered to get busy chefs and more boldfaced vintners down for the weekend. The Ritz-Carlton stepped up and provided free hotel rooms. Other corporate sponsors were cajoled as well. Of course, the Florida weather in winter helped as a draw. So did the fact that Napa vintners, known for their California affability and ready engagement with charities, aren't all that busy in January.

By 2005, the Wall Street Journal was pointing out that the new kid on

the auction block in Naples was raising more money than Napa. Yet there is still good will between festivals, even as a competitive spirit has pushed Napa's auction into improving its weekend by adding celebrity auctioneers, entertainment, better food and auction lots.

"Drinking wine is celebratory, it brings people together," says Dick Grace, whose donation of wines brought in \$90,000 at the 2007 Naples Winter Wine Festival auction. "And there is no more generous industry than the wine and food industry."

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"There are just so many helpful people on all sides," says Colgin. Wolfgang Puck, for instance, along with Emeril Lagasse, Tom Colicchio, and Daniel Boulud, have all participated in recent auctions. Robert Parker, Jr., the wine critic, who has led tastings during the weekends, is dazzled by the rowdy spectacle of the auction itself, where \$100,000 is not an uncommon bid for a bottle of wine. "I've never seen anything like it," he says. "It's surreal really, and uniquely American."

Indeed, Europeans are rarely as exuberant about their wealth. Or perhaps given the taxes they pay, they just aren't as inclined to be so giddy about their philanthropy.

The auction itself is a spectacle—a Dionysian showstopper with the flash and pulse of a Miami Heat game. Under a gargantuan tent on the grounds of the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, videos on giant screens promote vintners as if they're star athletes. Bidding for lots of coveted wines—Harlan, Joseph Drouhin, Castello Banfi, Pingus, Gruard-Larose and Louis Latour—becomes a heady spectator sport for guests. And each time an auctioneer yells, "sold," music blasts from speakers and corks pop as patrons jump and hoot and shake tambourines as if they were dancing at a bonfire of the charities. The noise is almost loud enough to carry to the impressive new \$16 million boys and girls club that the auction helped build many miles away.

"It's a show that gets people excited," says Boulud, "even a poor celebrity chef like me who can't afford to bid on anything."

This year's event will be held February 6-8, 2009. For more information call 888 837 4919. BG