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Food, Drink, and Philanthropy

The Naples Winter Wine Festival offers a gourmet experience that gives back to the community

WRITTEN BY GINA BIRCH

The food- and wine-punctuated holiday season doesn't end with the New Year. In Southwest Florida, 2013 begins with nationally and internationally recognized food and wine events, with the Naples Winter Wine Festival leading the pack.

Hosted by the Naples Children & Education Foundation, the festival takes place January 25 to 27 and features the theme "When Stars Align." It's a nod to the celebrities who attend, the celebrity chefs and winemakers who donate their talents, and the real stars of the event—the kids.

Since its inception in 2001, the festival has raised \$107 million for underprivileged and at-risk children. So it's fitting that the three-day event begins with a Meet the

Kids Day Tour and Luncheon.

The weekend continues with wine tastings and intimate dinners prepared by famous chefs. It culminates with a culinary showcase and live auction of sixty-five lots at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort in Naples.

More than twenty renowned vintners and sixteen celebrity chefs are participating in the 2013 festival, including Lee Hefter of Spago in Beverly Hills, Marco Canora of New York City's Hearth, and Kelly Liken from Restaurant Kelly Liken in Vail, Colorado. Winner of the prestigious James Beard Award for Best Chef: New York in 2012, Michael Anthony of Gramercy Tavern serves as the festival's chef de cuisine.

Bob Edwards and his wife, Terry, are chairing the 2013 festivities. When the couple first



attended the festival five years ago, they were "floored by what we saw," he says.

At first, Edwards didn't quite understand why attendees were spending multiple times more than the actual value of the items on the auction block. But he soon came away with a realization. "These people clearly had come with a philanthropic desire to donate—and to donate large," he says. "And the key was to walk away with the best darn door prize they could."

For many regular attendees, other events just don't quite compare to the Naples Winter Wine Festival. "I constantly hear from people who are attending events all over the world [who say] there is just nothing like being under the tent in Naples for the wine festival," says Edwards.

The outrageous items up for auction each year are one reason why. An item that has the wine world buzzing for 2013 is a vertical of Château Mouton Rothschild, a grand cru from Bordeaux. Edwards calls it one of the most important verticals that a collector



The 2012 Naples Winter Wine Festival (left and above) featured the usual extravagant auction lots and, of course, plenty of vino.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MILA BRIDGER

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could ever put together.

Another intriguing lot comes from California winemaker John Shafer. According to Edwards, this lot includes "a series of vintages in large-format bottles, a trip to Napa, and a chance to work in the kitchen at the French Laundry, maybe America's finest restaurant. That just doesn't happen."

Travel enthusiasts can bid on a private jet trip around the world or an excursion through Hong Kong, Macau, and Tokyo. Another trip to California includes the opportunity to get behind the wheel of an antique car from famous collector Peter

Chef Michael Anthony of New York's Gramercy Tavern serves as the 2013 festival's chef de cuisine.



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Terry and Bob Edwards (above) serve as the chairs of the 2013 Naples Winter Wine Festival, which includes a trip to Asia (below) in its auction lots.

SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 2001, THE NAPLES WINTER WINE FESTIVAL HAS RAISED \$107 MILLION FOR UNDER-PRIVILEGED AND AT-RISK CHILDREN.

Mullen and actually drive it in a road rally.

And the auction lots don't just include the chance to drive a car; attendees can also bid for the opportunity to own one. A



yet-to-be-named luxury automaker is creating a one-of-a-kind car for the event, and Lexus is also donating a vehicle.

After the money is collected, thousands of hours are spent determining how and where to distribute the funds in order to help the most children in Southwest Florida. So far, some 150,000 children have benefited from the Naples Winter Wine Festival. And when all the stars align this year, the festival will help support even more local programs that make a difference in the lives of Southwest Florida's youngest residents.

For more information about the Naples Winter Wine Festival, visit napleswinefestival.com or call 888-837-4919. The festival register only allows for 580 attendees, and tickets start at \$8,500 per couple. 🍷

A regular contributor to the publications of TOTI Media, Gina Birch can also be heard weekdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on 96.9 WINK-FM.

An Island Indulgence

Another local food and wine event to put on your radar for January is the Gasparilla Inn & Club's Seventh Annual Food & Wine Weekend, which takes place January 11 to 13 in Boca Grande. No big-ticket auction lots here, just world-class food and wine paired with a beautiful Southwest Florida island getaway.

Participants learn cooking techniques from leading chefs from around the United States while eating award-winning cuisine and drinking renowned wines. Simon Pound, the inn's dining room manager, calls it a "Bacchanalian fest."

The highlight of the weekend is the Gala Dinner on Saturday evening. The 2013 event features wines from Italian powerhouse Banfi, which work especially well with the styles and cuisines of the guest chefs. These chefs "allow the ingredients to speak for themselves," says Pound. "And the wines of Tuscany reflect well on this style of cuisine; nothing is overdone."

Seats are limited to fewer than one hundred, making it a more intimate affair than many food and wine festivals. Packages start at \$580, and the weekend typically sells out. For more information, visit the-gasparilla-inn.com or call 941-964-4500.

—G.B.



The Gasparilla Inn & Club's 2013 Food & Wine Weekend will feature wines from Italian vintner Banfi.