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Naples Winter Wine Festival

Organizers expect 'Magic' at 2012 event

By Laura Layden

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The next Naples Winter Wine Festival promises to be magical.

The theme for the 2012 festival is "Believe in the Magic." The event — one of the most successful charity wine auctions in the world — will be held Jan. 27-29, festival officials announced Monday.

Nearly 600 are expected to attend the auction, including celebrity chefs and world-renowned vintners. It will be held at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, featuring dozens of lavish lots that have yet to be announced.

Since 2001, the festival has raised \$94.5 million under the auction tent for the Naples Children & Education Foundation, which supports children's charities in Collier County. Last year, the event brought in \$12 million, up 48 percent from 2010 and up



Bob Clifford gives a thumbs-up after winning one of the auction lots during the 2009 Naples Winter Wine Festival at the Ritz-Carlton Tiburon. Clifford and his wife, Joan, pictured on his right, are the co-chairs of 2012 Wine Festival that will be held in January. **Lexey Swall/File**

135 percent from 2009, when the economy was deep into a recession.

The honored chef for next year's event is Tony Mantuano of Spiag-

gia, a favorite Italian restaurant on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. The restaurant is known for its

'Magic' »From 1A

award-winning food and wine, top-notch service and beautiful view.

Mantuano — who appeared on season two of Bravo's "Top Chef Masters" — imports wine, cheese, olives and other ingredients straight from Italy. President Barack Obama celebrated his election at Spiaggia in 2008.

Mantuano was recognized with the 2005 James Beard Foundation Award for best chef in the Midwest. He worked at several restaurants in Italy before opening Spiaggia in 1984.

The honor vintner is Prince Robert of Luxembourg, with Château Haut-Brion, a Bordeaux producer. Organizers are working on a once-in-a-lifetime vertical tasting of his wines. He was a participating vintner in 2010.

The co-chairs of the 2011 festival are Bob and Joan Clifford of Chicago. They have a seasonal home in Naples.

"We're amazed by the generosity at the festival each year and take pride in being part of an event whose funds are 100 percent allocated to children in need," Bob Clifford said in a statement. "We are thrilled to roll up our sleeves and contribute as co-chairs this year, and keep working the magic for the kids."

Over the past two decades, Bob Clifford, a nationally recognized attorney with his own law firm, has represented victims in every major commercial airline crash in the U.S. He's the liaison for the 9/11 lawsuit pending in New York federal court.

Joan Clifford is a former educator and once owned her own travel agency. Today, she's a docent at the Chicago History Museum and on the boards of the Goodman Theatre, Children's Memorial Hospital and Parkways Foundation in Chicago.

The money raised by the festival over the years has helped improve the lives of 125,000 children. The Naples Children & Education Foundation is governed by a nine-member board, representing 69 trustees.

It currently supports 23 charities, as well as focusing on its long-term strategic initiatives: early learning, medical/oral health, out-of-school programs, behavioral health and childhood hunger.

Wine Spectator magazine has ranked the festival as the nation's top charity wine auction since 2004. The event includes a Meet the Kids Day, where festival attendees interact with children who have benefitted from the foundation's grants. There are intimate wine dinners prepared by famous chefs at the private homes of trustees the night before the live auction.

Festival ticket prices are \$8,500 per couple and \$20,000 for reserved seating at the same vintner dinner for two couples.

*For more information, visit
www.NaplesWineFestival.com
or call (888) 837-4919.*