



*Clockwise: The convivial tent; a prized set of bottles for auction; thousands of glasses to be poured; festival Chef de Cuisine Michael Anthony of Gramercy Tavern; guests will try hundreds of wines.*

## STARRY NIGHTS

THE NAPLES WINTER WINE FESTIVAL BLASTS OFF TO THE STRATOSPHERE, PUTTING THE FUN IN FUNDRAISING. **BY MARK SPIVAK**

For the thirteenth annual Naples Winter Wine Festival, the chairs and trustees of the festival's founding Naples Children & Education Foundation (NCEF) chose "When Stars Align" as the theme for the three-day weekend bash touching down January 25-27. Most events, including the charity auction Saturday for more than 500 people will be centered in a tent erected on the lawn of The Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples. The theme fits perfectly, as the shining lights of the epicurean and wine-

making universe come together so harmoniously with the glittering minds behind the NCEF to create a blockbuster lineup of dining, bidding and giving.

The festival has become the largest philanthropic wine event in the world, raising \$107 million since its inception in 2001. The generosity of the bidders has become legendary. Best of all, the proceeds from the auction go directly towards helping local underprivileged and at-risk Collier County children. The NCEF conducts

studies to determine where the dollars raised will be used most effectively.

"We've set up a free dental clinic for kids in conjunction with the local University of Florida dental school," says Bob Edwards, a festival trustee serving as chair along with his wife, Terry, this year. "Last year's focus was eye care, and we were able to provide two pairs of glasses for each participating child. We discovered there were entire classrooms where no kids could see the blackboard."

From an emotional standpoint, the key moment of the weekend is the Meet the Kids Day Tour & Luncheon, which takes place on Friday. Attendees interact with the recipients of the NCEF's funding and hear their life stories face to face. "Sometimes they're so difficult that you have a hard time listening," Edwards says. "You can go from laughter to tears very quickly."

The culinary constellations will burn bright at Friday night's series of vintner dinners, intimate affairs for roughly 30 guests each, held in the trustees' homes. Celebrated chefs come to Naples to prepare the lavish meals, and festival goers are assigned to the dinners in advance. Michael Anthony of Manhattan's Gramercy Tavern is this



year's Chef de Cuisine. Returning veterans such as Tony Mantuano (Spiaggia, Chicago), Lee Hefter (Spago, Beverly Hills), Julian Serano (Picasso, Las Vegas) and Michael Tusk (Quince, San Francisco) represent some of America's highly regarded and sought-after tables with multiple James Beard Foundation awards. They will be joined by other dynamic personalities, such as Kelly Liken (Restaurant Kelly Liken, Vail, Colorado), Vitaly Paley (Paley's Place, Portland, Oregon) and Barbara Lynch (Menton, Boston).

The vintner selection is star-studded as well. A sampling of what to expect: Old World luminaries Piero Antinori of Marchesi Antinori (Florence, Italy), Laurent Ponsot of Domaine Ponsot (Morey Saint Denis, France), and Marc Perrin from Château de Beaucastel (Orange, France). Complementing them are principals representing some of the best estates of Napa Valley, including Kistler



Vintners Laurent Ponsot (far left) and Piero Antinori (left) travel to Naples this month to showcase their world-famous offerings.

Vineyards, Silver Oak Cellars, Shafer Vineyards, Staglin Family Vineyard, and Darioush.

Even with so much wine flowing, all eyes will be on the podium when Saturday's auction begins. This year's lots, as in years past, feature extraordinary one-of-a-kind experiences, like exclusive excursions to the wine country in Italy, France and California, as well as a cruise through the Greek isles on a 150-foot yacht. And as if a stellar private dinner for four couples hosted by Domaine Serene vintners Ken and Grace Evenstad were not an irresistible attraction, this package also includes a visit with Captain Kirk

himself, William Shatner, plus the meal will be prepared by renowned chef Vitaly Paley at the Evenstads' Oregon home. In addition to three nights at the private Domaine Serene Winery Hill House, the experience includes a tour of the Evergreen Aviation & Space Museum in McMinnville, Oregon, to see the legendary Spruce Goose—the largest airplane ever constructed (flown just once and constructed entirely of wood) to move troops and material across the Atlantic during World War II. The chance to step inside the cockpit, something not offered to museum visitors, is also on the agenda.



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A custom-designed table that protects its precious Château Mouton Rothschild cargo is a top auction lot at the 2013 Naples Winter Wine Festival.

Of course there will be spectacular lots dedicated to fine wines. Last year's highest earner was donated by vintner Prince Robert of Luxembourg, president of his family's Bordeaux estates, which sold twice at \$550,000 each. It included eight rare Château Haut-Brion bottles from 1935, 1945, 1959, 1961, 1975, 1989, 1990 and 2009, plus six bottles each of the 2010 vintage of Haut-Brion Blanc and Rouge.

This time, the one wine lot every serious oenophile will want to own will be the 64-bottle vertical collection of Château Mouton Rothschild. One of the five Bordeaux first growths, Mouton pioneered the concept of the artist's label in 1945 when Baron Philippe de Rothschild commissioned painter Philippe Jullian to design a special label commemorating the end of the war. Every vintage of Mouton Rothschild

since has featured a painting by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Marc Chagall and Andy Warhol. As art collectors, Bob and Terry Edwards were intrigued by this concept, and went about assembling the ultimate combination of wine and art. The Mouton lot will have one bottle of every vintage from 1945 through 2009, displayed in a hand-built, temperature-controlled case created by the Thomas Riley Artisans' Guild in the shape of a dining room table with a glass top that allows guests to admire the labels as they have dinner.

While the shimmering excitement of the festival and auction attracts so much attention, the true center of this universe will always be the Collier County children and their families whose lives are so positively changed by the dollars raised. That's the real star power. ♦

# the WHEEL WORLD

BY **HOWARD WALKER**  
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