

Napa auction's Florida cousin

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Jason Tinacci / Napa Valley Vintners
Auction Napa Valley

At the upcoming Auction Napa Valley on Saturday, all eyes will be on the paddle-holders and the spiraling bids under the white tent at St. Helena's Meadowood Resort. The curious will wonder how many fundraising dollars one afternoon of free-flowing champagne will bring.

Auction Napa Valley was once the most successful charity wine event in the United States, measured by the amount of money it reeled in each year. Now in its 31st year, the auction has been upstaged by the Naples Winter Wine Festival in Florida. In January, that festival's live auction raised \$12 million, surpassing Napa's most recent live take of \$6.9 million in 2010.

How has Naples managed to raise more money than Napa for seven straight years when it isn't even a wine region? With Napa Valley know-how and plenty of it.

Naples organizers tap into Napa's expertise and credibility by having the majority of its U.S. vintners from the valley, with the remaining 40 percent from other countries.

Participating vintners each contribute a signed magnum to the live auction's Vintners Magnum lot. They each also contribute wine to an individual lot and often include exclusive tours, tastings and private winery dinners. Finally, they pour their wines at a vintner dinner during the auction weekend.

Napa Valley's Ann Colgin, who plays an integral role in both auctions, said, Napa vintners have a high profile in Naples.

“Organizers greatly appreciate them,” she said. “Because Napa vintners come to Naples, that's one reason vintners from other countries come ... If you call up a winery in Spain and tell them you're in Naples, they'll be baffled until they hear that the Napa vintners are going to be there.”

Beth Milliken of Spottswoode in Napa Valley said her winery donates an auction lot to Naples “because it's our opportunity to share Spottswoode with the broader audience that attends the Naples auction.

“The demographic of the participants (bidders) is compelling. The Naples auction is perceived as a good place to showcase one's wines and winery.”

While it's commonplace for charity auctions to import Napa Valley vintners, it's unusual to have one with such fundraising prowess that it surpasses Napa's totals.

Naples peaked in 2007, raising a total of \$15.6 million compared to Napa's high of \$10.5 million in 2005. What's more, Naples' highest bid was \$2 million for a Rolls Royce Phantom Drophead Coupe in 2007. By contrast, Napa's highest bid was \$1.1 million for a trip to Italy, wine and an intimate gathering with the vintners in 2007.

Colgin said Naples' strength is its lifestyle lots, which include trips and cars, while Napa's strength is promoting Napa Valley wines.

“Napa showcases great wines from Napa Valley and intimate contact with the vintners at their homes and wineries,” Colgin said. “Naples offers an opportunity to meet vintners from around the world, which is also a great strength. And it's also in a great part of the country in January.”

Terry Hall of the Napa Valley Vintners, which hosts Auction Napa Valley, said “the goal of the Napa auction is to use the quality and reputation of Napa Valley to raise money for local charity ... I realize it's one with limited reach, but that's what the auction is about.”

When it comes to fundraising dollars, Hall said, “it's not a competition (between Napa and Naples). It's a myth people are stirring up. ... It's disingenuous.”

That said, Hall pointed out that the title of the most successful wine charity auction belongs to Auction Napa Valley because during its 30-year history, it has dispersed \$97 million and expects to exceed \$100 million this year. Naples, by contrast, has dispersed \$94.5 million during its 11-year run.

For years Napa has trumpeted its position as the world's premier wine auction, issuing press releases describing the pricey gathering as “the most successful wine auction in the world” or “the world's largest wine charity event.”

The auction not only raised money for charity, but also helped to elevate the visibility of the region among the well-heeled wine lovers who can afford Napa's wines.

Colgin said both organizations care less about the title and more about the local charities they support. Naples funnels money to underprivileged and at-risk children in Collier County. Napa's auction benefits local health, youth development and affordable housing.

“I say bravo to both of these groups,” Colgin said. “It's tremendous. I see this as a great thing they're doing for two communities, and it all began because of the wine. The wine was the inspiration.”

Colgin said Napa and Naples are the two most successful wine auctions, adding with a laugh, “and to be successful it takes two things: Great lots and at least two people who want every one of them.”

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