

Charity Auctions Get Creative in 2010

In the world of wine charity auctions, 2010 was what college sports coaches would call a “rebuilding year.” Plenty of auctions performed admirably, some even set records, but taken as a whole, the tight victories in the charity auction scene last year appear to represent a bridge between a hard-luck 2009 and—it is hoped—a full return to form in 2011.

The list of the 10 highest-earning charity auctions of 2010, as determined by live auction bid totals, is almost identical to the 2009 list, but the more recent year’s numbers were much more encouraging. The \$20,286,120 raised among the 10 auctions is still 31 percent off the 2008 lineup total, but represents an increase of nearly as much over 2009—a 28 percent uptick. Certainly, early signs of economic recovery allowed buyers to loosen their purse-strings a bit, but auction organizers can also be credited for galvanizing bidder enthusiasm with creative promotions and show-stopping packages.

Barbara Balik, organizer of Evening with the California Winemasters, in Burbank, Calif., called her lots “hands-down” the best in the auction’s history, in part because of serendipitous generosity from donors who offered major packages unsolicited.

Jane Brovelli, executive director of the V Foundation Wine Celebration, realized the need for an aggressive campaign to elevate the quality of lots and bring more winemakers into the fold. “We polled our guests [before the auction], and in response, we diversified our lots. We had trips all over the world, from Argentina to Chianti to Fiji.”

Of the 48 auctions that submitted data to *Wine Spectator*, many touted particularly unique and extravagant auction packages involving wine.



The Naples Winter Wine Festival featured 2010’s top-earning live auction.

Though the Naples Winter Wine Festival auction took top honors overall, Auction Napa Valley claimed the only seven-figure single lot; the large-format vertical of Colgin Cellars Cariad Napa Valley from 1999 to 2006, with a private tasting and dinner at Colgin and a personal cellar consultation, sold for \$1 million.

Taking a quirkier path, the Classic Wines Auction in Portland, Ore., sped away with \$20,000 for a 1982 Checker Marathon Cab that appeared in *Mad Men*, *Catch Me If You Can* and all three *Spiderman* movies; the winning bidder would also find five cases of Mendocino Wine Co. Cabernet Big Yellow Cab

2005 in the trunk. And a “Go Loco in Cabo” lot raised \$145,000 at Emeril Lagasse’s *Carnivale du Vin*. The winners will get a night of wine and tequila tasting with Lagasse and Sammy Hagar at Hagar’s Cabo San Lucas casa.

Rusty Staub, retired all-star baseball player and founder of an eponymous New York auction, summarized the year as a roller-coaster ride. “Everybody wants to raise the kind of money that they used to raise,” he said. “Well, that dog ain’t huntin’ out there very often.” But Staub, whose long-running auction raises money for food banks, managed to get the hunt on for a Mario Batali and Lagasse dinner package graced with ’82 Bordeaux first-growths and a spread of DRC vintages, at \$120,000.

No one knows what the future holds, but if 2010 was cautiously encouraging, the explosive showing at Naples’ 2011 event in January may augur real recovery for charity wine auctions. A sea of 100-point wines and a 1-ton bronze sculpture lifted this year’s total to \$12 million, nearly on par with the salad days of 2006. Chairman Bruce Sherman acknowledged some economic turnaround, but said, “We never set expectations. I was just thrilled that we got the support of all these vintners, friends, sponsors and trustees.”

—Ben O’Donnell

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TOP 10 U.S. CHARITY WINE AUCTIONS OF 2010

EVENT	BENEFICIARIES	LOCATION	LIVE BIDS*
Naples Winter Wine Festival	Naples Children and Education Foundation	Naples, Fla.	\$7,118,000
Auction Napa Valley	Health, youth and housing nonprofits	St. Helena, Calif.	\$6,090,000
Rusty Staub	Emergency food pantries	New York	\$1,135,700
Carnivale du Vin	Emeril Lagasse Foundation	New Orleans	\$1,051,000
High Museum Wine Auction	High Museum of Art	Atlanta	\$1,021,000
The V Foundation Wine Celebration	The V Foundation for Cancer Research	Oakville, Calif.	\$1,020,950
Evening with the California Winemasters	Cystic Fibrosis Foundation	Burbank, Calif.	\$777,370
Central Coast Wine Classic	Healing, performing and studio arts charities	Avila Beach, Calif.	\$763,100
A Toast to Good Health	The Mount Sinai Hospital	New York	\$659,000
Classic Wines Auction	Children and family charities	Portland, Ore.	\$650,000

*Each year, Wine Spectator tracks the results of charity wine auctions in the United States. These auctions have multiple revenue streams, from ticket sales, corporate sponsorships and silent and live auctions. For the purpose of comparison, the auctions are here ranked by their self-reported live auction totals.