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Highlights from the 2012 Naples Winter Wine Festival

There may be lots of glamour at this annual event, but there's
a more important reason it's so successful

By James Molesworth

The annual Naples Winter Wine Festival has all the trappings of an A-list event. Based at the Ritz-Carlton Tiburón Golf Resort in Naples, Florida, the list of participating vintners includes the likes of Ann Colgin of California's Colgin Cellars, Prince Robert of Luxembourg of Bordeaux châteaux Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion and Peter Sisseck of Spain's Dominio de Pingus. The event's well-heeled attendees enjoy generous pours while eating food prepared by a list of chefs that includes Wolfgang Puck, Dean Fearing, Kelly Liken, Bill Telepan and more. The festival ends with a day-long live auction attended by approximately 600 people.

With all the wine and food industry glitz and glamour on hand, it would be easy to lose sight of the festival's main mission: charity. But the trustees of the event make it clear from the start, it's all about the kids.

All of the proceeds from the auction, which this year raised \$12.2 million, go to support the Naples Children & Education Foundation that provides services to underprivileged and at-risk children in Florida's Collier County, an area where many Haitian, Mexican and other immigrant families struggle outside of the limelight of the county's high-end coastal resort and residential development.

To make their point, the trustees of the event organize a "meet the kids day" prior to the auction. Nearly 200 people piled out of buses at one of the educational centers funded by the charitable foundation. There we were met by Jack, a 7-year-old boy with autism who had no language skills when he first entered one of the volunteer-staffed assistance programs. On this day, he was acting as official greeter, reading everyone's name tags and welcoming them to the center.

Once inside, festival attendees were able to get up close with the children and volunteers who run two dozen different programs, all funded by the proceeds from the auction. I met Somaya, a very shy, beautiful 4-year-old Haitian immigrant with a lovely gap-toothed smile who was getting her first taste of preschool education. From eye testing for preschoolers to therapeutic horseback riding sessions for children from broken homes, the range of services funded by the event is impressive. But when 15-year-old Dulce stood up and delivered a heart-rending tale of domestic abuse that ended when her mother brought her and her younger sister to a volunteer shelter funded by the event, no one cared what they would be eating or drinking that day.

Equally impressive is the way the trustees administer the funds they raise. Organizations must petition for funds and those that receive them are not simply given the money in one lump sum left to their own discretion. Instead, funds are doled out over time for better sustainability. All funds must go directly to children's programs, as opposed to salaries, for example. The trustees also help the programs with their budgeting as well as applications for additional state and federal grants where possible. They maintain oversight of all the programs and combine those that might be offering duplicating services. It's one thing to give money to charity. It's another to closely target it and make it efficient, and the trustees of the event have done just that. The results were on full display.

I was invited to attend this year's Naples Winter Wine Festival as a moderator for a special tasting of châteaux Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion in honor of Domaine Clarence Dillon's Prince Robert de Luxembourg, the festival's featured vintner. Along with Prince Robert, I was joined by estate manager Jean-Philippe Delmas as we presented a matching vertical that featured the 2000, 1990, '89, '82 and '61 vintages from each estate. It was both a unique offering, as the estates are generally not paired together at tastings, and an arguably historic tasting, as neither Prince Robert nor Jean-Philippe had ever presented the two 1961s side by side.

The nearly two-hour tasting seminar was a free-flowing conversation of the estates' contrasting styles and differing terroirs as well as their history and plans for the future. Following are some of my very casual notes on the wines.

Haut-Brion vines are on markedly different terroir than those of their sister property, with the vineyards situated on gently rolling sandy, stony soils atop clay. The vines are planted at about 3,200 vines per acre and average 35 years of age.

Though some of La Mission's vineyard parcels are neighboring Haut-Brion, La Mission's main vineyard portion is on flatter soils featuring richer gravel and clay with chalk underneath. In addition, the vine density at La Mission is dramatically higher—4,000 vines per acre—and the vineyard base is also younger, averaging about 25 years old.

Though both estates' grand vins are typically composed of a majority of Merlot, along with Cabernet Sauvignon and the occasional drop of Cabernet Franc, the resulting wines are markedly different thanks to their terroir. With the same ownership, same winemaking techniques and same vintages, one couldn't ask for a better demonstration of terroir.

The Haut-Brion wines showed their distinctly graceful tobacco and earth profile, framed by fine-grained, supple tannins which seemed to stretch out longer and longer the deeper the vertical went—Haut-Brion is a "thoroughbred," as described by Jean-Philippe. In contrast, La Mission's wines came off as more overtly mouthfilling when young, while showing a slightly richer personality with more robust black fruit and tobacco notes that unwind on a slightly faster trajectory than Haut-Brion's.

"Haut-Brion is always silkier, but always a little tighter," noted Prince Robert. "La Mission is always more velvet, more masculine and more generous earlier," he added.

Both 2000s showed youthful vibrancy and the vintage's distinctly racy style. They seemed approachable despite their youth. Yet later on, after all the wines were poured and tasted, I went back to the 2000s. With the additional context, they seemed remarkably youthful and destined for long life.

Jumping to the '90s, a decade's worth of additional aging made a marked imprint on the wines, picking up more mulled fruit and spice notes with a core of warm compote. In particular, a gorgeous orange rooibos tea note fluttered through on the '90 La Mission, while the Haut-Brion showed a singed mesquite edge and seemed a touch more reticent. Both were just beginning to open up.

Equally as dramatic as the difference between '00 and '90 was the difference between the '90 and '89 vintages. The 1989s were easily the most flamboyant of all the wines in the tasting. With roasted fig, currant, steeped tobacco leaf and espresso notes, the '89 La Mission was both chewy and inviting. The '89 Haut-Brion was also roasted and very expressive, with plum preserve and fig sauce notes that seemed to darken and expand as the wine sat in the glass. As expressive as they were, their richness and concentration was undeniable and both should cruise for another two decades in the cellar before truly reaching a peak.

The pair of '82s provided the most divergent examples of the two estates, perhaps because La Mission was not yet under control of the Dillon family at the time (they purchased it in 1983). Fully mature, the '82 La Mission showed lovely cedar, truffle and mineral notes and was the most approachable of all the wines in the tasting. The '82 Haut-Brion easily outpaced it though, showing its silky texture and perfumy incense note, while adding extra dried blood orange and black tea for superior range and length.

From there, it was on to a pair of stunning '61s. The '61 La Mission was almost sappy, with still-vibrant kirsch fruit and a stunningly pure finish that sailed on and on with elegance and finesse. In contrast, the Haut-Brion seemed to be adding power and depth, with both dried and fresh currant fruit laced with dried blood orange, cedar and sanguine notes and superfine tannins that refused to quit. The last duo showed a tight quality gap once again while the terroir still blazed through, providing a fitting contrast to end a very special tasting.

There was a tremendous amount of generosity and goodwill on display all weekend long at the event. I was honored to have been invited and humbled by what I saw. On auction day, I was simply overwhelmed by the wines that were being poured at my table, a selection of more than two dozen wines which included California Cabernets such as 2001 Araujo, 1994 Bryant, '95 Colgin Herb Lamb and '94 Harlan Estate; a Bordeaux lineup that included the '34 Lafite Rothschild, '34 Gruaud-Larose, '70 Latour, '99 Pétrus and '90 Margaux as well as other classics including the '89 E. Guigal Côte-Rôtie La Turque, '98 Ornellaia Masseto, '75 Vega Sicilia Unico, '86 Penfolds Grange and '88 Gaja Costa Russi.

Winemaking techniques, owners, winemakers, grape varieties, vineyard sources and climate all change over time (sometimes dramatically) making direct comparison between older wines and their present-day versions relatively useless. But tasting such old wines provides wonderful insight into how the force of great terroir displays itself, providing a diversity that always shines through, which is of course what brings us all back for more wine.

As a wine writer, I am afforded the opportunity to taste such wines more often than most people. This is a rare privilege though, not an entitlement. I understand how lucky I was to be part of it and am extremely grateful for the opportunity.

Kudos to the entire volunteer staff of the Naples Winter Wine Festival & Auction for their remarkable efforts along with endless thanks to the trustees, donors, sponsors and participants of the event.