

# NOUVEAU



## Naples and Napa

The two biggest charity wine auctions in the United States vie annually for the top spot but turn out to be very different, as Elin McCoy reveals



Paddles flashed, confetti flew, and bidders at bottle-strewn white-clothed tables cheered in Naples, Florida, and St Helena, California, this year, as wealthy wine lovers splashed out a collective \$25 million at the US's two biggest charity wine auctions. One is part of the Naples Winter Wine Festival, held the last weekend of January (in 2017, January 27–29). The other, coming up for its 37th anniversary on June 1–4, 2017, is Auction Napa Valley. In 2016, I attended both of them and was struck by their similarities—but much more by their differences.

Every year, the two weekends aim for the highest dollar take. In 2016, Napa hit \$14.3 million, with Naples not far behind, at \$11.1 million. Organizers like to say, “It’s not a competition. We complement one another.” Well, sort of. Superficially the two events look a lot alike. Both are several-day extravaganzas with wine tasting and celebrity chef experiences in addition to auctions. You run into many of the same people, like the omnipresent Jean-Charles Boisset. All the money raised underwrites local charities. And the glitzy, money-rich centerpiece of each one is the Saturday live auction of lavish lots where top bidders get to pull out their wallets. Yet they differ in location, atmosphere, vibe, size, dinners, tastings, and cost.

### Naples: all about the kids

Let’s start with Naples, which held its first three-day festival in 2001, inspired by Napa’s. This city on the Gulf of Mexico is known for high-end shopping, golf courses, and über-wealthy residents. Because the event is held at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, you don’t get ocean views. The weather was cloudy and cool this year, though blissfully warmer than New York’s January snows.

In contrast to Napa, the charity aspect is front and center. “It’s all about the kids,” I was reassured over and over again. Friday morning and afternoon are dedicated to a tear-jerky “Meet the Kids Day,” where you could tour booths of the more than 40 children’s charities the auction supports, to find out more and be inspired to reach even deeper into your pocket. The whole Naples weekend has a resort vibe. It feels exclusive, intimate,

even cozy, because it’s limited to 580 people, and you see them and the 48 attending vintners at almost every event. The ticket price—\$10,000 per couple, \$25,000 for two couples if they want to sit together throughout—certainly weeds out the casual attendee.

Another big difference is that Naples features top vintners (and their wines) from all over the world. In 2017, they’ll include Burgundy’s Louis-Michel Liger-Belair and Guillaume d’Angerville, Bordeaux’s Pierre Lurton, Piemonte’s Gaia Gaja, and Peter Sisseeck of Spain’s Pingus among the many international star wine players. Some pour at the dinners, some at three casual seated and walk-around lunches. (The most surprising wine I tasted was a Radevic Estates red from the first private winery in Montenegro.) The Thursday kick-off before the official weekend is a small, highly focused sit-down tasting called The Vintage Cellar that costs extra. This year it revisited the Judgment of Paris Tasting in its 40th-anniversary year. In 2017, the ten-vintage vertical tasting of Harlan Estate will be the magnet (see also WFW 53, p.76).

### Intimate and exclusive

Adding to the intimacy is the fact that Friday night’s 17 dinners, with a vintner and his or her wines and a celeb chef cooking, are hosted in trustees’ homes—grand mansions, to be more precise. Mine was at the vast waterfront estate of Minnesota businessman and philanthropist Lee Anderson and his wife Penny, with wines from Peter Michael Winery and food by the chef from renowned The Farrington House. Dress was “Hollywood vintage glamour and Gatsby attire,” which meant sequined flapper dresses and feather boas; outside, classic Duesenbergs from Anderson’s car collection were on display.

The auction in a big white tent is as fierce and noisy as Napa’s, but smaller. It offered many more lots than normal this year—64. Like Napa, it focuses on insider experiences and items that you couldn’t get otherwise. Glamour cars and celebrities—like the Rolls-Royce Silver Dawn and a private cooking class and dinner with Mario Batali and Glenn Close—drew the biggest bids. Some of the most intriguing lots were lavish trips—to Bali, the Galapagos, a private jet around Asia, and a two-week voyage on

Scenes from the Napa and Naples auctions, where charity, friendship, wining and dining go well together.



*The World Residences at Sea*, which won a top category award in this year's World's Best Wine Lists. In 2017, there will be more fancy cars, golf, and travel, including a 24-day journey around the world in a private jet, a week-long stay at an estate in Burgundy with private tastings at famous producers, and a ten-day trip to India with custom-made saris and jodhpurs.

The weekend is fun but has the kind of intense, contained atmosphere you get when attending a weekend conference at a high-end hotel. Most of the eating and drinking takes place at the Ritz-Carlton, inside or outside on a lawn dotted with palm trees.

### Napa: all about Napa

Napa's event, on the other hand, is all about the Napa Valley—you drink only Napa wines, go to parties at Napa wineries, eat food mostly cooked by Napa chefs, bid on auction lots donated by Napa vintners, and spend a lot of time outdoors admiring the views. This year's new alfresco activities included yoga in a vineyard and vineyard *plein air* painting classes.

Like Naples, the Napa auction proceeds go to local charities like the hospital, but the weekend also has another equally serious purpose: to preserve Napa's reputation as one of the world's most important wine regions. The valley's casual-chic food-and-wine lifestyle is on full display under the hot June sun, and it's very enticing. You ask yourself: Do Napans live like this all the time?

The event is slicker and more stylishly packaged than Naples; even the catalog has an über-hip design. From its tiny beginnings in 1981, Napa's auction has morphed into a highly orchestrated four-day sequence of events, culminating in Saturday afternoon's live auction in a mercifully air-conditioned tent at the Meadowood Resort and a grand dinner on the wide green lawn afterward.

The weekend is much bigger and more diverse than Naples, with more parts and people and, therefore, a less intimate and exclusive feel. About 850 bidders cram into the live-auction tent and up to 2,000 attend Friday's day-long barrel auction. You find intimacy only at the 40-odd vintner-hosted brunches, lunches, and dinners—I went to two, one for 22 people at Continuum on Pritchard



Hill, with its fabulous views and stellar Cabernets, another for 15 at Adamys on Howell Mountain, where we dined by candlelight between rows of barrels in the cellar. The 2016 edition seemed to exude a new energy and excitement compared with recent years. For the grand dinner, South America's renowned chef Francis Mallmann dug a trench in the lawn for live fires, and rib-eye racks and whole chickens cooked over the flames. Afterward, we danced to the beat of very jazzy Le Van Van, a 30-piece Cuban band. (Ironically, Mallmann will be one of the featured chefs in Naples in 2017.)

### Wine-steeped

Prices for the whole shebang are roughly comparable to Naples, at \$4,000 per person, with VIP tickets (including accommodation, private car, and driver) at \$20,000 a couple. That gets you entry to Thursday night welcome parties, a vintner dinner, all the auctions, and a farewell brunch. But unlike at Naples, you can attend just one part of the weekend and spend a lot less—a ticket for the live auction and following dinner, for example, was \$2,000. For \$550, you could spend Friday at Robert Mondavi Winery, tasting 100 current-release



wines from around the valley, and participate in the barrel and silent auctions, plus chow down on superb food from local restaurants. (Philippe Melka's barrel brought the top bid of more than \$62,000.)

This year, there were only 36 lots in the live auction, all put together by Napa vintners, with many centered on special insider experiences in the valley, like a stay at Francis Ford Coppola's historic Niebaum mansion at Inglenook (plus wine, of course). But quite a few of the lots could have appeared in the Naples catalog: big-format bottles of Scarecrow paired with jewels by Chopard; a trip to Africa with Garen and Shari Staglin paired with Staglin wines (the top lot at \$1.05 million). There were even a couple of overlaps between the two auctions this year: Napa also offered a two-week stay on *The World Residences at Sea*.

The big difference is that every lot has a Napa wine element; there are no super-luxury cars or lavish trips with no wine attached. None of the 2017 auction items has been announced, but since Coppola will be next year's chair, expect a Hollywood vibe.

Which to attend? Well, the dates don't conflict, so go ahead, do both. They're for good causes!