

Naples Winter Wine Festival: Cold-weather buyers

Food, wine, and breathtaking auction bids—
Elin McCoy reports from an unusually chilly but
typically enjoyable and successful edition of
the Florida children's charity fundraiser

On Saturday, January 26, under cloudy skies and cooler-than-usual temperatures, wine auctiongoers in Naples, Florida, crowded into a big white tent on the lawn of the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, glasses in hand, as the Southwest Florida United Community Choir serenaded them with rousing gospel songs.

This live auction was the big-spend centerpiece of the 19th annual Naples Winter Wine Festival, held from January 25 to January 27. The Christmas-carol-like theme? "Joy to the World."

The cold weather seemed to energize bidders. Maybe the action of constantly raising your paddle with enthusiastic bids in the \$100,000 to \$500,000 range and jumping up to clap and cheer warmed up many of them. I relied on a shawl and sipped some truly lovely wines, like Mouton's 2014 Aile d'Argent white, while contemplating what I'd bid on if I won the lottery.

The final tally hit a breathtaking nearly \$16 million, all of it designated for at-risk and disadvantaged children in surrounding Collier County, Florida, and funded through the Naples Children & Education Foundation. More than 275,000 children have benefited since the auction's founding back in 2001.

"Wine," said Bart Araujo of Napa's Accendo Cellars, "is an amazing catalyst for doing good." Araujo and his wife Daphne were the festival's Honored Vintners this year and have participated since 2002, impressed by Naples's charitable initiatives.

Think of the several-day Festival as the other famous American charity

wine auction, a southern and winter counterpart to Auction Napa Valley in June, which last year brought in \$13.6 million.

Bidding and dining and wining
Naples native Jeff Gargiulo, who also owns an eponymous Napa winery, explained: "The idea for the festival started in my Naples backyard. And it's been successful beyond our dreams." Over the years, the auction has raised a total of \$191 million.

As in Napa, the weekend's events have settled into a basic format: a special vintage tasting and lunch on Thursday that not everyone attends; a week-long online auction; a morning Meet the Kids Day tour of the charities that benefit on Friday; vintner dinners in trustees' homes that night; and the live auction on Saturday, followed by more food, wine, and dancing.

It was an ongoing feast for foodies and vino lovers, with walk-around tastings of stellar wines, as well as the chance to talk to some 30-odd featured vintners from four countries, lunches and dinners cooked by celebrity chefs such as Richard Reddington of Napa's Redd Wood, and a slew of master sommeliers to pour and explain. Wagyu steaks turn up frequently. Ditto stone crab and oysters.

Still, the main purpose of the weekend is getting people to open their wallets and part with as much money as possible. Naples provides two bidding opportunities.

The week-long online auction is a relatively new part of the weekend.

Opposite: A welcoming glass at a Mardi Gras-themed party, one of the 18 vintner dinners on the Friday night.





launched in 2015, and it seems a work in progress. It featured smaller, less expensive lots, like private parties on sleek yachts, a villa in Cancún, and a lot I've never seen at any wine auction: the chance to play sheriff for a day with presentations from the SWAT team and the bomb unit.

All the real-money action is at Saturday's live auction, which starts at 1pm and goes on and on for nearly six hours. Understandably, attendees eventually start wandering around to taste the wines on someone else's table and chat. I spotted the suave Dmitri Augenblick, development director at Château Cos d'Estournel, taking a selfie, while kisses and hugs and noisemakers punctuated the successful bids.

The sheer number of lots, 63, was overwhelming, and each one included so many elements—luxury travel, one-of-a-kind exclusive experiences (a meet-and-greet with a Supreme Court justice), dinners at Michelin-starred restaurants, jewelry, magnums of great wine—people almost seemed to lose track of what, exactly, they were bidding for. As always, exotic trip destinations predominated: golfing throughout the Scottish Highlands and southern Ireland (\$260,000), exploring Paris with footwear star Christian Louboutin (\$240,000), attending the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo (\$340,000), and my personal choice, a foray to Lapland, Finland, to view the Northern Lights (\$190,000).

The one strangely lowball winning bid was for Lot #7, which consisted only of mere wine—eight double-magnums of Screaming Eagle from vintages 1992 to 1999. It brought a paltry \$350,000. I was expecting at least double that.

In another difference from Napa, the lots that pulled in the biggest bucks contained no wine at all. The top bid of \$550,000, for example, went on a customizable 2020 Bentley Continental GT Convertible. Three battling bidders took the price of Lot #14, a private yacht excursion in the Virgin Islands, to \$330,000, so the donor tripled the offer, swiftly bringing in a cool \$990,000.

Photography by (previous spread) Mila Bridger, opposite (top) Peter Falencik, opposite (bottom) Eric Strachan.
Top: Some of the happy faces on Meet the Kids Day. Bottom: Encouraging bids at the six-hour live auction.

All of the featured producers reiterate that the biggest reason they donate is that they're genuinely moved by the charities at the heart of the event and want to contribute. That attitude is fostered by the emotional yet feelgood Meet the Kids Day

Truly inspirational work

Once a small town of just 4,000 people with long beaches, Naples now boasts some 150 golf courses and property values that just keep going up, thanks to its preponderance of multimillionaires. The vibe at the Winter Wine Festival is resort casual (lots of turquoise and pink dresses and jackets) and is fairly intimate since it's limited to about 600 attendees. You see them over and over again during the weekend, so there's plenty of time to strike up conversations and make friends.

That opportunity for friendship and the chance to showcase your wines draw the 32-odd featured European and American vintners like Tim Mondavi of Continuum, who was there with his son Carlo and daughter Carissa. "The people behind Naples have great cellars, and they're influential people," he observes. "And we have a tradition here. My father Robert was the third honored vintner." For Opus One's David Pearson, attending is a way to foster close personal relationships "with people who love our wine." Barbara Banke of Jackson Family Estates, who has been coming for 17 or 18 years, says the auction "helps establish higher prices for our top brands." This year she brought her Oregon Pinot Gran Moraine.

But all reiterate that the biggest reason they donate is that they're genuinely moved by the charities at the heart of the event and want to contribute. That attitude is fostered by the emotional yet feelgood Meet the Kids Day, when everyone has a chance

to talk directly with children who have been helped by the programs the auction funds. What has been accomplished is truly inspirational.

The food and wine highlights

For me, though, the two best wine parts of the whole weekend were the Thursday kickoff, a serious sit-down tasting that highlights wines from a renowned estate, and the Friday night vintner dinner, which offers a glimpse into how Naples entertains.

This year's Vintage Tasting spotlighted Burgundy house Joseph Drouhin. The wonderfully charming and modest Véronique Drouhin treated guests to five-vintage verticals of Drouhin's Beaune Clos des Mouches Blanc (spanning 1986 to 2016) and Clos Vougeot (spanning 1990 to 2015).

"On a clear day, you can see Mont Blanc from the hillsides of Clos des Mouches," Drouhin insisted (something I've certainly never been lucky enough to experience). The 2000 was everything you want in white Burgundy, while the 1990 Clos Vougeot reminded me that there's no substitute for the region's great reds.

But perhaps my favorite event was the entertaining vintner dinner I attended, hosted by Anne Welsh McNulty at the lavish waterfront home—okay, mansion—of Rodney and Kathy Woods. It was one of 18, each with a celeb chef cooking and one or two vintners providing wines.

After ducking through a giant spaceship cutout to express the dinner theme of "Journey to a New World," I dined on the best of this earth: diver scallops with black truffles, dry-aged ribeye, and much more, cooked by brilliant chef John Tesar of Dallas restaurant Knife. Ceretto and Napa winery Carte Blanche—owned by Nicholas Allen, a cousin of Prince Robert of Luxembourg—provided the wines. In a nod to the dinner theme, Allen and his general manager DJ Warner appeared with pointed headgear to emulate the titular extraterrestrials of the 1990s movie *Coneheads*.

Much merriment and wine and food discussion followed—a welcome respite from a world of border-wall politics and Brexit. And it was all for a very, very good cause. ■



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