



CHAMPAGNE

WISHES CABERNET DREAMS

Hot Lots and Great Fun Promised at Napa Valley's Auction

It is a 30-mile-long block party, from Carneros to Calistoga, and oh, how the wine and fun flow. Each June when California's Napa Valley invites wine lovers, fun lovers, love lovers and everyone else seduced by the romance of the happy valley that can (put on a party, that is), flyer who figure, *ah, this is an event not to miss* won't be wrong. Officially, it is known as Auction Napa Valley 2007, the granddaddy of American charity wine auctions that since its inception more than 20 years ago has given upwards of \$68 million to social service and healthcare nonprofits. Unofficially – and here it gets just as interesting – it is four days of wining and dining among convivial friends, everyone loving the warmth and open doors of vintners whose hospitality is largesse and creativity expressed – and seldom matched.

Come for the swirl of parties, wine tastings, dinners and auctions, or come to raise a paddle and bet the farm on a lot comprised of rare or newsmaking wine: guests at this event may not share the same seriousness of purpose but damn, if they don't all love the glories of the grape. This is wine at its most

romantic. Wine siphoned from a barrel for tasting, like at a futures auction that this year is held in the cellar of the Trinchero Family Estates in St. Helena and highlights case lots from 100 exciting Napa Valley wineries. Or wine as poured nonstop at "Taste Napa Valley," a food and wine "experience" that features the signature wares of dozens of local restaurants and artisan food producers. Thomas Keller of The French Laundry offering crispy waffle-like cornets filled with salmon tartare. Bob Hurley of The Napa Valley Grill grilling quail. Gordons' Café serving mozzarella-filled focaccia: These are the type of treats savored during the al fresco feast.

Of course, Napa Valley is master of romance, especially with its settings. Acres of undulating, sun-kissed vineyards, ivy-dressed wineries, aged stone caves: these and other fairy tale venues invite auction-goers to a whirl of winery open houses during this year's "Auction Eve." Accept one vintner's invitation or 20. Either way, a limo-for-hire can party-hop you from one winery to the next, each wowing you wildly with not only its particular pride of wines, but with its one-of-a-kind

welcome as well.

Swirl, sniff, taste and spit. The wine taster's m.o. may or may not characterize how you enjoy auction days that promise to be busy with theme-lunches and wine-dinners created by vintners in collaboration with some of the country's hottest chefs (usually followed by music and dancing). But it is certain that wherever you find yourself the oh-so-fortunate guest, wineries will do everything they can to impress. For whether you accept an invitation to, say, the Niebaum-Coppola Estate Winery, where Francis Ford Coppola has been known to put on an extrav-

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Beneath the big top auction day, bidders (and revelers) watch lots come and...go.



agant Italian dinner “fit for Don Corleone himself,” according to the invitation, or another winery of even more elaborate entertainment, you will understand: This auction is meant to be big. Colorful. And just as lavish as lavish gets.

Consider the typical lot on the block during both the live auction, held at elegant Meadowood Napa Valley Resort, and the newly established E-auction (May 24-June 8) that sees bidders around the globe dueling for the goods. Rare and collectible wines, luxury items, vacations: the splendor of offerings to be going, going, gone with each clack of the auctioneer’s gavel can be stunning in their ability to thrill. Ten cases of Staglin Family Vineyards Auction Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon for \$161,950 (or \$1,350 a bottle)? Typical. A cooking vacation in Aspen plus a trio of double magnums of Clos du Val’s best for \$22,000? De rigueur. Whether it’s an escorted trip to the legendary island of Capri, a vintage Jaguar or a vertical of a vintage all the wine world will die for, prizes at Auction Napa Valley perfectly express the event’s considerable wow-factor. So, really, come for the wow – and the wine. The good time will be sublime.

Napa Valley Auction 2007 is held June 7-10. For tickets and information, napavintners.com (707) 963-3388. ✕

Actress Gina Davis boogies with the gala’s best of them; making friends at the barrel tasting (this page, top) and by the glow of the after-party bar.

