

Auction nets more than \$2M for NVV

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A sell-out crowd of some 600 retailers, restaurateurs and importers spent more than \$2 million last weekend for close to 200 lots of wine handcrafted solely for the trade attending the popular mid-winter auction, Premiere Napa Valley.

Sponsored by Napa Valley Vintners, and held at CIA Greystone, the auction supports the trade association's worldwide marketing programs and helps fund the Rudd Center for Professional Wine Studies.

In a little over three hours, hard-working auctioneers Ursula Hermacinski and Fritz Hatton sold off 192 lots of wine especially made for this event — a mix of distinct vineyard blends and hand-selected barrels from some of the best vineyards in the valley.

Setting yet another record as the event enters its second decade, total proceeds amounted to \$2.16 million, a 16 percent increase over last year's take.

Once again, the wine lot from Rombauer Vineyards — five cases of 2005 cabernet sauvignon from the winery's Stice Lane vineyard — was top lot of the auction. Verej Jazirvar, general manager of the 1,500 member Petroleum Club, a private Oklahoma City wine club, paid \$50,000 for the Rombauer lot.

Chaired by the de Leuze family of ZD Wines, Premiere Napa Valley saw 71 successful bidders acquiring title to five-, 10- and 20-case lots of one-of-a-kind futures, with an average case price of \$1,781. Including a number of first-time attendees, tradesmen from all across the country as well as Hawaii and Japan, eagerly bid on a total of 1,215 cases of wine.

"The vibe at the tasting was fantastic," Brett de Leuze said of the barrel tasting that precedes the well-received day-long affair."

This is the best event we do in Napa Valley for the wine trade," declared Vineyard 29's Chuck McMinn. "Where else can you see all of your key customers at one time?"

The trade auction's top bidder was a regular high bidder, Gary Fisch, who owns and operates a trio of Gary's Wine and Marketplace outlets in northern New Jersey. Fisch purchased 21 auction lots — a total of 145 cases — paying a total of \$331,000.

Picking up 90 cases at this year's auction, Marcus Graziano, owner of Capitol Cellars in Roseville, was second highest bidder. Rounding out the top 10, in order, are Nakagawa Wine Company Ltd., Tokyo, Japan; The Wine House, Los Angeles; Hi-Time Cellars, Costa Mesa; Graycliff Hotel and Restaurant, Nassau, Bahamas; Petroleum Club, Oklahoma City; Willow Park Wine & Spirits, Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Fireside Cellars, Santa Monica; and Fine Wine Source, Livonia, Mich.

Neither restaurateurs nor retailers were shy with their bids. Five cases of 2005 Lewis Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon, blended from hand-selected barrels for this Premiere offering, were the object of a bidding war by four of the auction's top bidders. The gavel

eventually came down on a high bid of \$42,000.

A like amount was spent on newcomer Jeff Smith's Hourglass cabernet sauvignon from the 2005 harvest, a three block blend (36-24-36) for this inaugural offering from the new Napa Valley Vintners member.

This year, \$40,000 was spent on two perennial favorites from Shafer and Phelps. The Shafer offering was five cases of cabernet sauvignon from Sunspot Vineyard, one of the components of Shafer Hillside Select. The Joseph Phelps Vineyard lot consisted of 10 cases of 2005 cabernet sauvignon from the Backus Vineyard.

High bids of \$38,000 were registered for 10 cases of Cliff Lede Vineyards 2005 cabernet — blended from Stags Leap District vineyard blocks named Cinnamon Girl and Dark Side of the Moon — and five cases of 2005 cabernet blended from wine sourced from Robert Foley Vineyards and Switchback Ridge's Peterson Family Vineyard.

The event's top bidder spent \$36,000 for a full barrel (20 cases) of Viader Vineyards and Winery's 2005 Howell Mountain cabernet sauvignon, while the Petroleum Club of Oklahoma paid \$35,000 for 10 cases of select blocks of 2005 cabernet sauvignon from Stags Leap Wine Cellars SLV and Fay vineyard sites, called the Peacock's Tail.

Other top bids included:

- For bids of \$30,000 — a full barrel of Beringer Vineyards 2005 Ridge to Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon; five cases of Revana Family Vineyard 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon specially selected by winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett.
- For bids of \$28,000 — five cases of D.R. Stephens Estate 2005 Moose Valley Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon; 10 cases of Jones Family Vineyard 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon specially selected as well by winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett.
- For bids of \$26,000 — 10 cases of Duckhorn Vineyards 2005 Candlestick Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon; 10 cases of Hartwell Vineyards 2005 Highland Red Cabernet Sauvignon; five cases of Pride Mountain Vineyards 2005 Summit Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon; a full barrel of Saintsbury 2006 Brown Ranch Pinot Noir.
- For bids of \$23,000 — five cases of Spottswoode Estate Vineyard & Winery's 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon; 10 cases of Brown Estate Vineyards 2005 blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and zinfandel from Chiles Valley District.
- For a bid of \$22,000 — 10 cases of Rubicon Estate 2005 Clone 29 Cabernet Sauvignon.
- For bids of \$20,000 — five cases of ZD Wines multi-vintage Petit Abacus Bordeaux blend; 10 cases of Regusci Winery 2005 Block 11 Cabernet Sauvignon; five cases of Stewart Cellars 2005 Special Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon; five cases of Staglin Family Vineyard 2005 Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon.

Worthy of second glass

There were a lot of excellent wines tasted at last Saturday's Premiere Napa Valley. Some of them are:

- Much too good to spit out at the tasting was Shafer Vineyards' absolutely yummy cabernet from the Sunspot Vineyard. While this wine is part of the Hillside Select

blend, it nevertheless was set aside for Shafer's 25th anniversary a few years back and a limited number of magnums bottled. As a Shafer fan who got his hands on one of those magnums, I can only hope the Shafers will also make some of the 2005 Sunspot available for local fans. Please, please, please ...

- Benessere has the only half-acre of sagrantino planted in the Napa Valley, a "mystery" grape grown primarily in a limited area around the picturesque town of Montefalco, in Italy's Umbria region. Not widely known outside Italy, sagrantino is an inky, garnet-colored wine that many believe was introduced to Umbria by Franciscan friars returning from Asia Minor. Those who cotton to this theory agree then that the name for the grape was derived from the Latin word for sacred. Regardless of its origins, this grape produces a fleshy, fruity, spicy wine and Benessere's fruit forward version tastes of cherries, and is definitely a New World offering, not a copy of the Italian sagrantinos.
- Ceja Vineyards 2005 Pinot Noir, with a splash of 2006 reserve added for good measure, is a WOW wine. It's an elegant, silky wine bursting with bright fruit flavors.● Not a shy wine, La Jota Vineyard Company's 2005 Petit Verdot (12 percent merlot has been blended in to soften the tannins) is a delicious mix of spice and blackberries, and shows off its Howell Mountain pedigree.
- Sylviane's Cuvée is a finesse blend of cabernet sauvignon (53 percent), cabernet franc (33 percent), merlot (10 percent) and petit verdot (4 percent) expressing the organic/biodynamic farming practices of Ehlers Estate winemaker Rudy Zuidema — an elegant mouthful of ripe cherries with a lingering cassis finish. I hope he's kept a little around the winery so that visitors who plead loud and long enough will get an opportunity as well to discover perfection in a Bordeaux blend.
- I liked the sweet tannins and ripe juicy cherries and currants that tasted beautifully in the 2005 Grgich Hills Estate Petit Verdot from vintner Grgich and winemaker Ivo Jeramaz, harvested from another biodynamically farmed Napa Valley vineyard, this one in Yountville.● Spencer Roloson's 2005 Syrah from Block One of La Herradura Vineyard is expressive of the Rhone style, with its beguiling nose and taste of ripe cherries from entry to finish, a seductive syrah to be sure.
- Arger-Martucci Vineyards' inky 2005 Cabernet Franc from Atlas Peak has a touch of merlot and cab, tastes of Bing cherries and cinnamon and proves to be a lush expression of this traditional blending grape.
- Speaking of grapes that normally add spice to the cabernet, malbec showed up in a pair of outstanding offerings. One is from a new player, Jocelyn Lonen Wines, with winemaker Jamey Whetstone producing for this inaugural lot a wonderful expression of juicy, spicy red and black fruit from Stagecoach Vineyard, cherries, cassis and a lovely plum finish that I'd serve up in a heartbeat. The other comes from Reverie on Diamond Mountain, and may well be the last malbec crop — a big, spicy expression of this unique grape from what the winery calls "the girdled harvest," in which vines were girdled in an attempt to increase yield.
- Heidi Peterson Barrett's Amuse Bouche Winery offered a cabernet sauvignon/merlot blend that provided oodles of juicy blackberries with a hint of coffee and spice.
- PlumpJack Winery's 2005 Syrah comes from a special block of Hudson Vineyard in the Carneros, a full-bodied, well-balanced syrah with cherries and black pepper.● Newton Vineyard winemaker Stephan Carrier offered "a missing piece of The Puzzle," which turned out to be a blend of all the Bordeaux varietals except malbec (the backbone is 60 percent cabernet sauvignon) that's a big juicy mouthful of blackberries with a ripe plum finish.

- John Kongsgaard's 2005 Arietta Fantasia is a blend of cabernet franc (52 percent), merlot (33 percent) and syrah (15 percent) from choice Hudson Vineyard blocks that's a soft, rich, lush red — the very model of a well-balanced Napa Valley wine.