

The 21st annual Premiere Napa Valley auction took place on February 24. Following somewhat in the mold of Burgundy's famous Hospices de Beaune sale, it's a wine-trade event that auctions off selected bottles or barrel lots donated by Napa wineries with the proceeds going to fund the Napa Valley Vintners Association.

More noteworthy in a way than the \$4.1 million raised from the 218 lots of wine was the fact that this was the first major trade event to take place in Napa Valley since massive fires tore through it and Sonoma in October 2017. While the harvest was all but finished and very few vineyards burned, the tragic loss of 43 lives and more than 6,000 homes weighs very heavily on this tight-knit community. That elephant was acknowledged as being in the room, but a jubilant winemaking and loving crowd was looking to move past it, at least for a day.

#### A week in wine

The event is, however, much more than the Saturday on which it takes place. Much of the preceding week is packed full of various parties at the marquee names around the valley. Dinners, festivities, and great quantities of wine are offered up for tasting by a select few whom winery owners hope will in turn bid up their wines. The winemaker's prize for a high-dollar final bid on a donated lot is purely the bragging rights. In turn, the winning bidders earn the bragging rights to these exclusive and generally quite expensive wines to sell on to special select customers.

As a minor point of clarification in the current scene of ever more wine auctions around the world, this is not the only pan-Napa Valley auction, since there is also Auction Napa Valley at the end of May. It's open to the public, and those proceeds are sent to local charities. Premiere Napa Valley requires a resale license, so it's solely restaurant and wine-store owners (along with we scraggly members of the wine press) who flock to the region for it.

Despite this bar of professionalism, at the various parties there was much less spitting than one would expect when trying to analyze what are, for Napa, exceedingly young wines, most of the lots being from the 2015 vintage. For those who do get in the doors, the



## Premiere Napa Valley 2018 Leveling out at last

Miquel Hudin reports from this year's event, including details of some of the highest-priced lots, and why not hitting the heady heights some had expected might be positive in the longer run

opportunity to let loose and celebrate a bit is definitely encouraged by the wineries—maybe even more so this year as everybody tried to move on from the tragedy of the fires. In reality, there are too many parties and tastings to attend, so many made them a social affair and welcome respite after some tough times for the region. Fresh rains had brought a splash of green and bountiful splendor to the few scorched

hilltops that were visible. For those fearing that the region might resemble a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the effects of the fire are largely unseen in Napa Valley, save for murmurs off to the side of the room about how one person or another is getting on.

There are many, however—like Robert and Laura Schermeister, owners of Schermeister Cellars—who still feel the lingering lick of the flames. While

All photography by Alexander Rubin for Napa Valley Vintners



a firefighter friend warned them about the path of the flames and they were able to save some items from their wedding last year, they ultimately saw their home reduced to a statistic as one of the 6,000 that was lost. The cyclical and demanding nature of the wine business has been helpful, though; as Laura said, "We still had to go and make wine. The wine isn't going to wait for you. It keeps you going."

#### The morning of

Those living and working in Napa carry these stories and let them take a backseat so as not to dwell on what can't be changed. Instead, the focus was on the wealth of excellent parties throughout the day on the Friday that bridged into the main event on the Saturday, which takes place each year in the 19th-century building of the Greystone Culinary Institute of America. While some wine events are all elbows, inappropriately large backpacks, and spit cups, this comes across more as handshakes and friends sharing wines. The tables of big names are of course more crowded, but the questing glasses come and go, and

there is none of the cheetah-on-gazelle aspect that is all too frequently found at other tastings.

It was clear that most buyers had already made up their minds, based on either the parties or familiarity with the winery. Thus, the tastings on the Saturday morning before the auction offered the chance to have a second taste and put to rest any niggling doubts before the bidding got hot and heavy. It also gave the chance to chat with the winemakers themselves.

In line with the general "Napa style," the wines are still quite youthful and up front. But then you come to rightfully worshipped winemaker Cathy Corison, who says of her 2016 lot, "I love my '16. It was perfect weather, no spikes, just the right amount of fog. In essence, the perfect year." Tasting the wine, it was clear to see that it's classic Corison. Even in its current youthful state, there's an easy-to-discern linear crispness and defined direction to the wine, while it still holds plenty of ripe Napa fruit and

Opposite: A coveted, specially labeled auction wine. Above: Catalog for a tasting the day before the auction.

oak that's lovingly integrated. This wasn't lost on the bidders, and the 60 bottles up for bidding went for \$28,000, or \$467 a bottle (trade price).

High as this price might seem, it wasn't anywhere near the highest in the auction. That honor was grabbed by Vine Hill Ranch, at \$1,250 a bottle for the 60 it entered. The highest lot total went to the venerable Silver Oak, whose 240 bottles went for \$110,000.

These totals may seem staggering to most wine drinkers, and they are, but as surprising as it may seem, the auction made less money than in previous years. The peak was reached in 2015, when \$6 million was raised, but it has dropped each year since. Anyone can see that these prices are considerably higher than Napa's already high prices by comparison with most of the rest of the wine world. Many, however, had expected a rise, with people feeling charitable due to the fires, in the same way that the 2015 Hospices de Beaune saw a nearly 40 percent increase on the previous year. This was attributed largely to the terror attacks in Paris just two days previously and some proceeds going to help victims.



### Working the room

But the rise that some had anticipated did not materialize, despite all of the excellent work on the day by the auctioneers, Fritz Hatton and Ursula Hermacinski. Calling out lots turn and turn about, their two opposing styles worked to keep the room electric, even as the day wore on. Fritz employed the more classic style, with a vocalized purr that built a crescendo upon itself until a weighty amount was achieved and logged by the bang of the gavel. Ursula, on the other hand, has her own unique approach that has served her well for the past 20 years, essentially goading and playing upon the egos of bidders (who are still mostly men) to get them to bid higher, at one point chiding, “You’re laughing at her bid? Well, it’s not funny, because you’re going to lose.” It was amazingly effective to watch.

Many commentators, as well as winemakers, felt that the final lower total for the auction had been due for some time. Christopher Howell of Cain Winery saw 60 bottles of its 2015 Petit Verdot go for \$10,000, on which he commented with admirable candor, “It’s good. It’s a real-world price. I don’t really know how they’re going to resell some of these [wines at much higher] prices.” Robert and Laura of Schermeister saw their 60 bottles of Chardonnay go for \$5,000. “We’re a new winery, and this is only our second year at Premiere, so we’re quite happy to see that price for a white in this crowd of reds.”

**The rise that some had anticipated did not materialize, despite the excellent work by the auctioneers. It seems that an air of sanity may be settling over the auction. Despite the more muted totals, it’s still a wildly successful event and, this year, very cathartic. As NVV communications director Patsy McGaughy aptly stated, “There really is no substitute for being here”**



### An air of sanity returns

It seems that an air of sanity may be settling over the auction. While many winemakers would love to see their wines revered through stratospheric bids, at the same time they have come to realize that continuous growth was not sustainable and that at some point things had to level off, if not come down. While there have been rumors of ringers from the wineries pushing up bids in the past, everyone seems convinced that this certainly isn’t the case anymore. Some participating wineries have also pulled back on the number and scale of the parties during the week and over the weekend.

Despite these more muted totals for the auction, it’s still a wildly successful event and, this year, very cathartic.

In true California fashion, the organizers have leveraged the auction and the Napa brand into an online auction taking place simultaneously with 31 lots. It’s also been working hard to have additional coverage of, and greater accessibility to, the auction. The physical auction will most assuredly continue, because the jovial atmosphere and frenzied bidding, fueled by liberal quantities of excellent wine and a tremendous lunch by the Culinary Institute, make for a spirit of grand celebration. And as the communications director of Napa Valley Vintners, Patsy McGaughy, aptly stated, “There really is no substitute for being here in person.”

Top: Steven Spurrier, Karen MacNeil, Dave McIntyre.  
Bottom: Auctioneers Ursula Hermacinski, Fritz Hatton.