

Paradiso: Sonoma auction continues its rise

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The Paradiso wine auction continued its climb into the ranks of the top wine auctions in the nation when it raised \$2 million last Saturday in just four hours.

Preliminary figures showed the total was shy of last year's figure of \$2.5 million, but it still brought the total raised for children's organizations in Sonoma County to more than \$6.5 million in four years. The event still ranks as the third largest charity auction in the U.S.

To gain that kind of rapid growth, the auction's founders reached out across the mountains and brought in vintners from Napa Valley, home to the nation's second-largest charity wine auction, and pulled in folks from what is now the largest charity wine auction in the U.S., the Naples Winter Wine Festival. Formerly known as Imagine, Paradiso was created by vintners Jess Jackson, Barbara Banke, Fred Furth and Peggy Furth, and this year they brought a few more heavy hitters into the act to serve as co-chairs — Eleanor and Francis Ford Coppola, Sandra and Tom Jordan, Sally and Ray Duncan, Rhonda and Don Carano, Nancy and John Lasseter and Greg Morey.

It was held at Coppola's Rosso and Bianco Winery in Geyserville, formerly Chateau Souverain, where 400 guests gathered in a tent to begin bidding on 43 lots ranging from bottles of wine to a Maserati GrandTourismo, and from a Cirrus SR22-GTS airplane to a Labradoodle puppy.

Napa Valley lots

Several lots had a Napa Valley origin. Harlan Estate contributed a 3-liter bottle, plus a tour and tasting, which brought \$23,000; Leslie Rudd of Rudd Estate provided tours and tastings at wineries, plus lunch at Rudd and dinner at Press Restaurant; Cardinale (one of Jackson's wineries in Napa Valley) joined with Robb Report to host a chance to drive the car-of-the-year selection along with dinners at Napa Valley wineries; and D.R. Stephens offered a luncheon for 10 and a six-bottle vertical of Moose Valley Vineyard cabernet sauvignon. A "Napa Meets Sonoma" lot paired tours, tastings and dinners involving Margrit Mondavi and Sandra Jordan of Jordan Vineyards in Sonoma, along with wine from Jordan and Opus One. Two bidders for that one were in spirited competition, and the two women said they would give each bidder the prize, which went for \$24,000 each.

Robert and Margrit Mondavi attended. Robert was recognized as one of the wine industry's icons, while Margrit took the stage during the bidding for the "Napa Meets Sonoma" lot.

Napa Valley also was represented by Fritz Hatton, who handles auctioneering duties at Auction Napa Valley and other charitable events. Hatton walked among the audience to coax the bidding, and he was joined onstage by noted wine and food journalist Anthony Dias Blue.

Naples participation

Among others representing the Naples Winter Wine Festival was Shirlene Elkins, one of the event's trustees, who bought the last lot of the day, and it was her bid that brought the total to \$2 million.

That lot included 13 magnums of pinot noir from some of Sonoma's top producers, and when bidding appeared to slow down, Jackson, Coppola and Lassiter took the stage to try to coax the bids higher. Jackson said he'd add a bottle of his Stonestreet wine to the lot, and Lassiter, who heads Pixar Animation Studios, agreed to add a bottle of his wine as well. Then all three offered to sign their name tags for the winning bidder.



From left, Francis Ford Coppola, John Lasseter and Jess Jackson celebrate the final auction lot at Sonoma Paradiso Wine Auction at Coppola's Rosso & Bianco Winery in Geyserville. Faith Echtermeyer photo

Jackson took the microphone and said, "We're close to \$2 million — we're only \$49,000 away," and all three vintners said they'd toss in individual dinners.

The bid went up by \$49,500 and the gavel came down on the lot and the auction.

One of the traditions of the auction has been the Children's Concert, and this year some 3,000 children attended the concert at Wells Fargo Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa to hear "Music From Out of This World," including selections such as "2001:A Space Odyssey," "Jupiter," "E.T. The Extra Terrestrial," and the theme from "Star Wars." The San Francisco Family Circus also performed.

In preparation, children from more than 100 children's organizations took part in a music and art education program in which the youngsters were familiarized with the music and composers, the instruments in the orchestra and, this year, the solar system.

Several of the children representing the beneficiaries of the auction proceeds also were present at the auction.

Private screening

One of the lots included a movie and dinner in Coppola's private screening room in San Francisco, and Coppola said the movies shown wouldn't be just new films, but would include some old films from his archives. That brought \$35,000.

Another lot included dinner with ice skating legends Peggy Fleming and Brian Boitano, VIP passes to NBC's "Brian Boitano Skating Spectacular," along with backstage passes, and a 3-liter bottle of Fleming Jenkins syrah. Boitano personally introduced the lot.

The Maserati brought \$175,000, and the company's representative said he'd air-ship the car to the successful bidder, who was a wine enthusiast from La Jolla. When the airplane came on the block, that company's spokesman jokingly said he'd arrange for air-shipment of the plane, too. Jackson and his wife, Banke, bought the plane for \$470,000, which was a reported \$20,000 over the cost, so the balance went to the auction.

Jackson praised the Napa Valley participation in the auction, pointing out Silver Oak's involvement and indicating that "many Napa people are helping here. People in the United States love Napa and Sonoma and this (the auction) helps to elevate wine in the North Coast."