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Vintage philanthropy

By Michael Steinberger



On a humid Saturday afternoon in late January, hundreds of people gathered under a cavernous tent set up on the lawn of the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort in Naples, Florida, for a charity wine auction. There were several things that distinguished this particular event. For one, not every auction lot involved wine: there were also lavish trips, tickets to Sir Elton John's White Tie & Tiara Ball, a round of golf with British Open champion Darren Clarke, and a private concert by country star LeAnn Rimes. For another, the ambience was wildly festive; in addition to an ocean of wine to drink, music was playing, party horns were blaring and giant video screens broadcasted the action throughout the tent.

But what truly sets the Naples Winter Wine Festival auction apart is the amount of money it took in: a staggering \$12.4m, all of it for local charities. In the process, the NWWF, as it is known, surpassed the \$100m mark in total money raised, and cemented its status as the world's most successful charity wine festival – a heady achievement for an event that was first held just 12 years ago. This fund-raising prowess can be credited in part to the fact that Naples, which is located on Florida's Gulf Coast, is a very wealthy community. Yet more than half the money raised during this year's auction came from people who don't live in the Naples area, which illustrates the kind of renown that the NWWF now enjoys.

Indeed, the Luxury Institute has ranked it among the top 10 arts and entertainment events for affluent Americans, and with good reason: it is a hedonistic weekend-long party, featuring some of the world's most acclaimed chefs and wineries. This year's participants included Wolfgang Puck, Joachim Splichal, Dean Fearing and the owners of venerated wineries like Château Haut-Brion, Vega-Sicilia, Pingus, Drouhin, Colgin Cellars and Araujo. But amid all the revelry – and this is the key to the festival's success – the organisers keep focus squarely on philanthropy. As Chicago attorney Bob Clifford, who with his wife Joan chaired this year's festival, put it: "People know why they are there."

When we think of wine auctions, we normally think of starchy affairs held in drab New York and London showrooms. Likewise, we tend to view wine connoisseurship as an exercise in self-indulgence – the expensive pursuit of gustatory pleasure. In fact, though, philanthropy plays a significant part in high-end wine culture. While the wine-besotted seldom need an excuse to open a good bottle, a lot of truly great bottles are bought, sold and consumed each year on behalf of charity. Charity wine auctions invariably involve wine drinking, and there is no question that alcohol does get people to dig deeper into their wallets. But the wine director for New York chef Daniel Boulud's Dinex Group, Daniel Johnnes, who has been involved with multiple philanthropic endeavours, thinks that wine and charity are also a natural fit. "It's part of the nature of wine collectors to want to share great moments at the table," he says, "and that sharing instinct just naturally carries over to a desire to do something good for those who are less fortunate."

There is a long history of mixing wine with charity. The world's longest running wine auction, the Hospices de Beaune, which began in 1859, has a philanthropic basis. Held in Beaune, France, on the third Sunday of each November, the Hospices de Beaune is the cornerstone of Burgundy's post-harvest celebration, known as the Les Trois Glorieuses, and raises money for local health organisations. In 1981, just as California wines were starting to attract international interest, vintners in Napa Valley launched the annual Auction Napa Valley, which has since become one of the high points on the American wine calendar, and one with an impressive track record of its own. Last year, the four-day event, which is held in early June, raised over \$7m, and it has taken just under \$100m in its three decades of existence.

The fact that the Naples Winter Wine Festival has surpassed the \$100m milestone in its first 12 years underscores just how phenomenally successful it has been. Moreover, every dollar raised during the Naples auction goes to charity, which also sets the NWWF apart from Napa and other charity wine auctions. Tickets for the weekend are \$8,500 per couple; this year's festival, which is organised by the Naples Children & Education Foundation, was a sellout, with 580 attendees. The Foundation's board of trustees is comprised almost entirely of full- and part-time Naples residents, all of whom have enjoyed considerable success in various professional endeavours.

But while Naples itself is a very affluent community, it is situated in Collier County, an area with acute social needs. Indeed, the most recent US census found that 25 per cent of the county's children are living in poverty. The Naples festival began as an effort to raise money for two local organisations, the Boys & Girls Club of Collier County and Youth Haven. Elliott Singer, a founding member of the Naples Children & Education Foundation, told me that the event was conceived as a way for a group of local oenophiles to combine their passion for wine with their desire to do something on behalf of children in the Naples area. They raised \$2.2m the first year the event was held, in 2001. That far exceeded expectations and, as the numbers soared in subsequent years, the organisers realised how badly every dollar was needed. "We commissioned a study and found that there was a lot of need in the county and that the money we were raising could tackle a lot of problems," said Singer.

From the start, Singer and his colleagues were able to enlist the participation of prominent chefs and wineries, which helped draw attendees to the NWWF. Initially, all of the wineries were Californian, but the line-up now includes respected international ones, too. In fact, this year's honoured vintner was Prince Robert of Luxembourg, whose family owns two of Bordeaux's marquee properties, Château Haut-Brion and Château La Mission Haut-Brion. The festival kicked off on Thursday morning at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort with a tasting hosted by Prince Robert and his winemaker, Jean-Philippe Delmas, featuring Haut-Brion and La Mission Haut-Brion from five historic vintages: 1961, 1982, 1989, 1990 and 2000. (The tasting was not part of the regular ticket price; it had a separate charge of \$2,500.) Following the tasting, there was a lunch at which two other legendary wines were served: the 1975 La Mission Haut-Brion and the fabled 1959 Haut-Brion. Such was the parade of riches that at one point Prince Robert felt obliged to say, "We don't do this sort of thing very often." Me neither.

Friday began with a very different kind of event: Meet the Kids Day. Around 200 festival attendees were taken to a nearby youth centre to spend the morning with some of the children who benefit from the auction, as well as representatives of the two-dozen organisations that receive grants from the foundation. Parental and grandparental instincts immediately kicked in as festival-goers were entertained by the children. Afterwards, everyone headed outside to a large tent, where several older children gave moving testimonials about the ways in which they'd personally been helped. (Having learned from past experience, festival organisers had wisely provided tissues in advance, and quite a few people reached for them while listening to the tales of adversity and perseverance.)

This year's turnout for Meet the Kids Day was the biggest on record. Retired baseball star Rusty Staub, who was attended every edition of the NWWF, told me that back in 2001, only five people took part. But the numbers have grown steadily, and there is now a real desire among attendees to see where their money goes and the good that it does. On the bus over to the youth centre, I sat next to Minnesotan Carmen Campbell, who, with her husband Jim, a retired banking executive, owns a home in Naples. This was their fifth year at the festival, and she told me that, for them, Meet the Kids Day was an indispensable part of the experience. "When you first hear about the level of need in Collier County, it shocks you, and makes you feel guilty," Campbell said. "We wouldn't miss Meet the Kids Day. You meet the children, the volunteers, the directors – that's what motivates you."

Festival chair Bob Clifford and his fellow trustees want the children front and centre throughout the weekend, and the foundation keeps a close watch on how the money that it allocates is used. "It is an extraordinarily vigilant grant programme," Clifford said. "We've pulled grants and we've stopped payments. We want people to know that their money isn't disappearing down a black hole." Napa Valley winemaker Dick Grace, who has been involved with the NWWF since the start, told me that the determination of the organisers to keep the spotlight on the children is the reason for the event's fundraising prowess. "Meet the Kids Day has become as important in people's minds as the auction itself," Grace said. "They've done the best job of any auction I know at educating people about the cause, and that is followed by financial success. People will rise to the occasion."

After the morning at the youth centre, everyone re-boarded the buses and headed to a nearby yacht club, where a buffet lunch was served, along with the wines provided by several of the participating vintners. The afternoon included a few hours of free time, enabling some attendees to steal away for a round of golf, others to catch up on work or rest. Friday event was the culinary high point of the festival. Every year, a number of trustees host dinners at their homes for 30 to 40 festival attendees. For each dinner, one of the attending chefs is paired up with one or two of the wineries. These are elaborately choreographed affairs, in which the homes are basically taken over and rearranged to suit the needs of the evening. Some hosts simply vacate their homes during the days leading up to the dinner, in order to make way for the party planners.

The dinner that I attended was at a palatial condominium overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. Like all festival-goers, I was taken to and from the dinner by a town car, which is one of the many conveniences and perks that the organisers provide for attendees. At my dinner was this year's honoured chef, Tony Mantuano of Spiaggia in Chicago. Spiaggia specialises in very upscale Italian fare, and Mantuano was appropriately paired with Italian winemaking royalty: Gaia Gaja, daughter of the legendary Piemontese winemaker Angelo Gaja. The two of them put together an outstanding meal and were charming hosts. In addition to great food and wine, the evening had a wonderfully convivial spirit; it was a roomful of strangers who hit it off from the start and carried on the conversation long into the night.

The auction was the next afternoon. It started with a walk-around lunch on the grounds of the Ritz-Carlton Golf Club. In addition to numerous food stations, there were also several large tables groaning under the weight of excellent wines (the supply lasted the entire afternoon and deep into the evening). Just after 1pm, guests were summoned to the indoor tent for the start of the auction. Bob Clifford told me that putting together the auction lots is an enormous challenge; the people they are trying to entice to bid can afford to buy pretty much anything they want, so the lots need to be sufficiently unique and rare to appeal. As well as many wine-themed lots featuring rare bordeaux, burgundies and Californian wines, this year's auction items included a golf excursion to Ireland capped by a round and dinner with British Open winner Darren Clarke; a 2012 Mercedes-Benz SLS AMG Roadster; a two-week cruise for four aboard the largest fractionally owned residential yacht on the planet, The World; a seven-day cruise through Burgundy on an ultra-deluxe barge; a private dinner for 100 people prepared by Top Chef host Tom Colicchio and featuring a concert by LeAnn Rimes. Also on offer were tickets to the American Idol

final, and a walk-on part in the Emmy Award-winning television series *The Good Wife*. But surely the most extravagant item was a three-week round-the-world trip for two aboard a 50-seat Icelandair 757, which a gentleman at my table won for \$240,000.

The emotional high point came halfway through the auction. Prince Robert had donated a lot consisting of 20 bottles of Haut-Brion dating back to 1935, including a single bottle of the celebrated 1945 (one of the last of the 1945s still in the château's cellar). The bottles were contained in a console built to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the acquisition of Haut-Brion by the prince's great-grandfather, Clarence Dillon, and the lot also included Haut-Brion carafes and stemware. It was the subject of a spirited bidding war, finally won for \$600,000. A few minutes later, it was announced that Prince Robert had agreed to make a second, identical lot available to the runner up, and that both would be sold for \$550,000.

Naples is not a soft-sell auction. Every time a bidding war began to break out, volunteers clutching noisemakers surround the competitors and loudly urged them on. The dueling bidders were shown on the video monitors, with the word "Higher" flashing on the screens. Likewise, the auctioneers, who included London jeweler Humphrey Butler, American vintner Ann Colgin and Lydia Fenet of Christie's, were not above a little arm-twisting. Bob Clifford told me that the not-so-subtle pressure has never been an issue with auction-goers. "People have never complained about it or criticised us, and it works," he said. The fact that there was a lot of wine on the table undoubtedly helped (and some of the wines that were circulating were pretty extraordinary in their own right; it's not every afternoon that I find myself sipping 1989 Château Pétrus). In addition to being an entertaining sale, the auction gave attendees the opportunity to mingle with chefs and winemakers; I spend an hour chatting with Wolfgang Puck, who was seated next to me.

Clearing the \$100m mark was the unstated goal for this year's auction, and it became clear after several hours that the haul would easily exceed the \$6.5m needed to reach it. Still, when the hammer went down on the auction's final lot and it was announced that a total of just over \$12.4m had been raised, the crowd erupted in jubilation. As we all staggered out into the twilight a few minutes later, astonishment at the displays of generosity was written on many of the faces. Elliott Singer told me later that he and his fellow trustees were just as stunned as everyone else. "Every single year we are astounded at what we are able to do."

The 2013 Naples Winter Wine Festival will be held from January 25-27. Ticket prices are \$8,500 per couple and \$20,000 for a two-couple ticket with reserved seating at the same vintner dinner. For more information, contact the festival on +1239-514 2239 or email info@napleswinefestival.com.