

WINE AUCTIONS

Top 10 Charity Wine Auctions of 2009

For charity wine auctions, as in most realms where money moves, 2009 was about wishing for 2007, waiting for 2010, and trying to find a silver lining in the now. It was a year for softening blows and managing expectations, and the wine auction rankings tallied hard numbers against the economic realities.

The combined amount raised by 2009's 10 highest-earning events by way of live auction bidding is \$15,874,215. It is a humble haul; the 2007 Naples Winter Wine Festival banked \$15.67 million alone. Not since the economic downturn of 2002 has the total raised by the top 10 auctions dipped as low. So why are auction organizers so sunny?

"Would we have loved to have raised 10 million bucks? Absolutely," says Auction Napa Valley coordinator Terry Hall. "But it is a tough economy, and we're just thrilled that people brought [what they did] to the table. That's millions of dollars more than we had the day before."

Rusty Staub, of the namesake auction in New York, echoed the grateful attitude. "The only thing I can say about this year: it was the scariest on record. I know it's less than we've done in the past two years, but we're honored to be able to do it. It's going to feed a lot of people." The Rusty Staub Foundation emergency food pantries are the source of some 900,000 meals a year.

There were bright spots among the 60 auctions that submitted



Live bids at the Classic Wines Auction in Portland, Ore., raised more than \$700,000 for family charities.

results. Emeril Lagasse's *Carnivale du Vin* prepared to battle bidder trepidation with all-star offerings, including chances to hobnob with the likes of Martha Stewart, Andre Agassi and Sammy Hagar. But the auction's top lot was a surprise, according to director Kristin Shannon: "Charlie Trotter just came up on stage at the last minute and said, 'I have something to auction.' He started to put it together, I think, as he was talking." By the time he was done, a dinner for 10 with Trotter, Lagasse, Mario Batali, Norman Van Aken and Gale Gand was on the block. It sold twice, a \$360,000 buzzer shot that boosted the auc-

tion's total over the \$1 million mark and over last year's earnings. Joining the *Carnivale* in besting their 2008 totals were the V Foundation Wine Celebration and the Central Coast Wine Classic.

Auction Napa Valley notched the top two lots of the year, one a nine-day trip through Napa and Italy that includes stops at Piero Antinori's wineries, and the other a weeklong globetrot from Napa to Paris to Burgundy, along with 10 cases of Chardonnay from Staglin and the Hyde and de Villaine families. The first trip sold three times, for a total of \$1.1 million; the second sold twice, netting \$401,000.

So while the overall numbers may look gloomy, the story is more complicated. Early 2010 indicators seem to bear this out, as the 2010 Naples auction fired up \$7.1 million in live bids—a 40 percent vault over 2009. Naples auction chairman Francis Rooney stopped short of forecasting an across-the-board rehabilitation of auction fortunes in 2010, but maintained that the true success of a charity auction is measured by more than breaking previous records. "The kids need all the money we can raise, and they need it now more than they ever would have."

—Ben O'Donnell

TOP 10 U.S. CHARITY WINE AUCTIONS OF 2009

| EVENT | BENEFICIARIES | LOCATION | LIVE BIDS* |
|---|--|---------------------|-------------|
| Naples Winter Wine Festival | Naples Children and Education Foundation | Naples, Fla. | \$5,060,000 |
| Auction Napa Valley | Health, youth and housing non-profits | St. Helena, Calif. | \$3,766,000 |
| Carnivale du Vin | Emeril Lagasse Foundation | Las Vegas | \$1,224,500 |
| Rusty Staub Foundation | Emergency food pantries | New York | \$1,220,000 |
| The V Foundation Wine Celebration | The V Foundation for Cancer Research | Oakville, Calif. | \$947,051 |
| High Museum Atlanta Wine Auction | High Museum of Art | Atlanta | \$895,542 |
| Central Coast Wine Classic | Local charities | Avila Beach, Calif. | \$738,100 |
| Classic Wines Auction | Children and family charities | Portland, Ore. | \$733,420 |
| Evening with the California Winemasters | Cystic Fibrosis Foundation | Burbank, Calif. | \$725,900 |
| L'Été du Vin | Local cancer centers and charities | Nashville, Tenn. | \$563,702 |

*Each year, Wine Spectator tracks the results of charity wine auctions in the United States. These auctions have multiple revenue streams, from ticket sales, corporate sponsorships and silent and live auctions. For the purpose of comparison, the auctions are here ranked by their self-reported live auction totals.

