

A festival of distinction

Hosts spare no expense in the nation's premier charity wine auction

By Naples Daily News staff

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THE PREPARATION: Festival organizers spent countless hours preparing for leading wine event.

The hosts and hostesses of the Naples Winter Wine Festival know that distinction lies in the details: free-flowing \$1,500 bottles of Screaming Eagle cult cabernet; roaming opera singers; roast sturgeon served in the palatial dining room of a 22,000-square-foot estate with expansive views of the Gulf of Mexico; the opportunity to admire a Rauschenberg in the stark-white limestone halls of a Richard Meier-designed contemporary home; and the chance to drink a glass of Tenuta dell'Ornellaia 1997 Rosso Superiore with its vintner, Marchese Ferdinando Frescobaldi.

It's not easy satisfying the discriminating tastes of their peers -- an elite crowd of multimillionaires from Wall Street and industry.

But it's the details that have made the Naples Winter Wine Festival the premier charity wine auction in the nation. The Naples Winter Wine Festival passed the prestigious Auction Napa Valley last year as the top-grossing charity wine auction in the country. Last year, the three-day Naples Winter Wine Festival raised \$7.6 million for Naples' charities -- more than three times United Way of Collier County's annual fund-raising goal.

Mimicry is the highest form of flattery and this year, the 25-year-old Napa auction will change its format to be a little more like the 5-year-old Naples auction.

Napa Valley Vintners spokeswoman Stacey Dolan insists that there is no rivalry between the two auctions. But Naples' trustees were quietly crowing this week about their success at raising money for charity.

"I think we're very humbled by the whole thing," auction trustee Frank Hussey said.

Some of the trustees underwriting dinners and auction lots have spent close to \$1 million, said Denise Cobb, an auction trustee and former CNN anchor who serves as spokeswoman for the event.

The Naples festival, which draws some of the nation's top chefs, has created a buzz on the culinary circuit too.

"They've raised so much money," said Julian Serrano, executive chef of Picasso at the Bellagio who was inside the home of Nancy and Bryant Yunker Jr. on Thursday. "So people ask me, what is that?"

Behind the scenes in the days leading up the festival, the hosts were a whirl of activity -- sweating the details.

-- Staff Writer Gina Edwards

Enchanted Domaine

It was Thursday around noon, 24 hours before renowned chef Scott Tyser of the Aries Restaurant in Houston would arrive at the beachfront mansion of Lee and Penny Anderson.

Inside, it was countdown time for the dinner the Andersons and Larry and Marie Andrews would host Friday night.

The flowers hadn't arrived yet. Neither had the truffles, the Texas quail, scallops, cauliflower soup, braised sweet bread or the Serrano ham. They were to be flown in around 1 p.m. Friday, jetting into Naples with the chefs and vintners from around the nation and world.

Vintner Paul Hobbs, the 2000 Winemaker of the Year according to the "Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine," was yet to arrive at the Andersons' with his wines from Sebastopol, Calif.

Alvaro Palacios hadn't landed yet with his "most important new Spanish wines in a generation."

But Penny Anderson was calm -- even beyond calm.

"I've done a lot of entertaining," she said, her bright blue eyes wide with an openness and ease unexpected at such a time.

Preparing for the Wine Festival dinners is like hosting a wedding, many have said.

The Andersons were preparing to seat their 40 dinner guests at tables set up inside the landscaped courtyard of the castle-like mansion with 30-foot coral walls and few windows. Limousines bearing guests to the dinner will cross a bridge that looks like a drawbridge, complete with a moat-like fish pond beneath.

Guests enter the "Enchanted Domaine" through decorative iron doors, down the foyer past the Monet and Renoir that are now back where they belong. The paintings thrust the Andersons into the limelight two years ago when thieves entered through a beachside door and stole the two pieces valued at \$7 million.

The guests will be treated to a castle on the inside too, with Louis XIV furnishings, carpets, drapes and antique dishes, candlesticks and planters. And Penny's collection of Majolica Victorian ceramic art inspired by the French and Italian majolica of the Renaissance.

On Thursday, on an antique coffee table sat a Vendone Press book called "The Finest Houses of Paris."

The Andersons' Enchanted Domaine is a worthy rival for any of them.

-- Staff Writer Denise Zoldan

Artistic Expression

By Thursday afternoon, the florists had started draping the tables in handmade cloths of burgundy dupioni silk and arranging silver bucket centerpieces, each stuffed full with four dozen red and coral roses.

The electrician had arrived to check the strings of sparkling white lights adorning the patio topiaries that will light up Naples Bay behind the 16,000-square-foot French stone mansion inspired by the Ritz in Paris.

Inside the home's professional kitchen, Julian Serrano, the executive chef at Picasso at the Bellagio in Las Vegas was admiring the turbot -- a flat and spotted fish caught off the coast of Maine just 24 hours earlier. Serrano's two assistants hand picked crab and prepared the pastry for the petit bouchettes.

Hostess Dottie Yunker, surveying it all, needed a nap.

Serrano's flight didn't arrive until 1 a.m., so after picking the chef and his staff up at the airport it was almost 3 a.m. by the time the couple went to bed. Daughter Stephanie Yunker worked as a trouble-shooter, escorting Serrano on a two-hour trip earlier that morning to shop for ingredients at The Fresh Market in Naples.

"This does not come out of the pocket of the profit" for the charities, Yunker told a reporter, referring to the lavish dinner preparations. The dinner hosts, in this case Brian and Denise Cobb and Dottie and Bryant Yunker, pay for the vintner dinners -- the chef and his accommodations, the food, flowers, entertainment, gifts for the guest, and some wine, although the vintners offer their own specialties.

The quality of the food and wine attract the high bidders, all for a good cause.

Dottie Yunker had a number in mind -- the amount she hopes the wine auction will fetch for charity. But she certainly didn't want to put it in the newspaper.

Bryant Yunker and his son by the same name made their fortunes on Wall Street. Out back, Bryant Jr., owner of the home, had his 62-foot yacht "Bosta" -- Italian for enough.

For Dottie Yunker, there was no limit to the amount she hopes the auction will bring for Naples' charities.

-- Staff Writer Gina Edwards

Relentless Harmony

In his "best broken Spanish," John Scot Mueller directed a landscaping crew like an orchestra on Wednesday morning. He was trying to explain where to put three, 3-foot high tropical bushes that had arrived on the doorstep of his neoclassical, waterfront home in Aqualane Shores. Not in the rocks, he told them. They had to go in the dirt, next to the rocks.

After a few minutes, Mueller got the workers to understand what he wanted. As a first-time host he fretted the details.

"It's a lot of planning," said Mueller. "There's a lot of preparing. You've got 17 vendors to deal with at the same time."

The preparations began "the minute the party was over" last year, said Margaret Short, Mueller's assistant. That's when she lined up the vendors. But the quest began in earnest in September, as details began to unfold and contracts were signed.

Mueller moved most of his living room furniture out of his house and put it in storage to make room for the event. He had the wooden tables and linens made special for the night.

For about a week, Mueller had a "revolving door," with more than a dozen people coming in and out every day.

On Wednesday, workers with Premier Party Rentals scurried around his courtyard pool like ants, as they transformed it into a dance floor and stage for the band.

One crewman had the not-so-fun job of standing in a chilly pool to set up platforms that held up a see-through acrylic floor that blanketed the pool.

The dance floor would become the backdrop for a night like no other.

The menu, created by award-winning chef David Myers, with Sona restaurant in Los Angeles, included Indonesian-spiced bluefin tuna and duck breast.

Thirty bottles of wine from the Chateau Montelena Winery in Calistoga, Calif., awaited the guests. On Wednesday morning, a 58-foot Grand Banks yacht was getting detailed for guests to tour Friday night. No corner was overlooked.

-- Staff Writer Laura Layden

Magical Creations

Wine has a psychology, said sommelier Allen Katz as he cleaned off the 40-year-old bottles Thursday morning.

With anything that's kept in ideal conditions there's extra anticipation, he said. But few things are meant to live forever.

Friday night marked the end of the road for three bottles of 1961 Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte Red.

The labels became dust awhile ago, but the wine was meant to please.

"It's one of the top two vintages of the century in France," said Donna Solimene, co-host of the Magical Creations dinner.

And she proudly proclaimed they were older than her.

Solimene and co-host Pat Aluisi had to keep two vintners happy Friday night. But more vintners means more wine, and they didn't mind that.

Chef Rick Tramonto of Chicago's Tru had the makings of lobster-truffle risotto, rigatoni stuffed with truffle ricotta topped with a truffle puree and braised short ribs packed up and shipped down to Naples via FedEx.

On Thursday morning, waiting on the kitchen island were the 56 bottles of wine. Ready to be washed were the 368 wine glasses needed to hold all that wine until it was transferred to the mouths of the 38 guests.

"They will all be used," Solimene said.

--Staff Writer Kathryn Helmke

Uptown Reserve

Valerie Boyd and Jeff Gargiulo are used to throwing a good party by now.

The Naples Winter Wine Festival practically began in their own back yard. As founding members, they've hosted a dinner every year since the festival's inception. And as vintners themselves they host wine tasting parties at least three times a year in California, where they own a boutique family winery called Gargiulo Vineyards.

Though it's old hat for the couple, they still sweat the details. They are hands-on party planners.

A few days before the event, Valerie counted out sterling silver knives, forks and spoons on a kitchen counter to make sure there were enough. She wasn't sure. So she ordered more.

To host the party, the couple needed 200 forks, 80 knives, 40 spoons, 40 water glasses, 70 white wine glasses, 40 champagne glasses and 160 red wine glasses. Luckily, they didn't have to worry about the wine glasses. They have plenty of their own. They are after all in the wine business.

Valerie helped with the design of the tables. Jeff handled transportation for out-of-town guests, and carried boxes of wine to the event.

Their daughter, April Gargiulo, printed the menus and the name cards.

The couple had tall orders from their Italian chef Geoffrey Zakarian. His wish list included 60 small sushi cups, 40 pasta bowls, 40 "large, deep" bowls, 80 dinner plates and 40 large square plates, in green or white.

The theatrical-theme menu included four courses: Maine lobster and foie gras with black truffle sabayon, served on a cake of cabbage and wine-braised chestnuts; risotto with black ink Venetian style; dark chocolate ravioli filled with carrots and rosemary; and roasted baby rack of lamb with porcini mushrooms.

For dessert, guests devoured warm chocolate cake.

Sommeliers served six selections of wine, three of them from Gargiulo Vineyards. The others came from Sassicaia in Italy.

Boyd and Gargiulo hosted the party at the posh, Oriental-inspired home of Michael DeGroote on Gordon Drive. The home -- worth more than \$20 million -- rests on more than six acres.

--Staff Writer Laura Layden

Pure and Simple

The theme was Pure and Simple for the Lutgerts.

But preparing for this weekend's festivities was anything but.

Simone Lutgert's schedule was more than a little full Thursday.

A sculpture a month overdue arrived at 7:30 a.m. and had to be lifted by crane over her home.

Her husband, Scott, chairman of this year's festival, decided to turn 60. She threw him a surprise party at La Playa with 65 people to celebrate. That was squeezed in during the morning.

There was the Friday night dinner party she needed to get her Estuary home ready for. Also on the schedule was Thursday night's pre-party chef dinner on Keewaydin Island, which she helped host.

This weekend marked the end of a busy year for the couple.

As chairman, Scott Lutgert worked on this weekend's festivities and fund raising for a year, Simone Lutgert said.

He planned to celebrate Friday night with black truffles.

Chef Lee Hefter of Spago Beverly Hills served up three dishes with the delicacy -- risotto with black truffles, saut/ed scallops and black truffles, and short ribs and New York steak with black truffles.

"Give me anything with truffles," Simone Lutgert said.

-- Staff Writer Kathryn Helmke