

\$10.3 million raised at Auction Napa Valley



Vintner Tim Mondavi hugs Margrit Mondavi as his daughter, Chiara, right, looks on, following a moving video tribute to industry icon Robert Mondavi at the 28th Auction Napa Valley held at Meadowood Resort Saturday night. A late June tribute to the visionary winemaker, who passed away three weeks ago at age 94, brought in nearly \$1 million at this year's auction. *Lianne Milton/Register*

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Big bottles of cult status wine, no-stone-left-untaken trips all over the world, lavish wine parties, automobiles filled with collectible wine and old-fashioned star power combined Saturday night to push Auction Napa Valley 2008 proceeds past the \$10 million mark.

The second time this decade that the valley's trendsetting charity wine event exceeded all expectations, proceeds for the 28th annual fundraiser totaled \$10.3 million, just \$200,000 short of the record set in 2005.

"It's fabulous," enthused Kathleen Heitz Myers, who co-chaired this year's auction with her mother, Alice, and brother, David.

Noting that "people come here from all over the world" to bid on exceptional wine lots donated by the 300-member trade organization, Napa Valley Vintners, Myers said the outcome "validates what we do in the community. I can only offer praise for all the staff and volunteers do, and thank the bidders for their support. I'm thrilled."

Jay Leno, host of “The Tonight Show,” returned to wine country to kick off this year’s dinner auction with trademark quips and observations of current events. He tackled everything from politics to out-of-control teen stars, from obesity to the Pope.

His remarks tickled the crowd’s fancy, including the queen of TV talk shows, Oprah Winfrey, who dined in the giant white tent on the Meadowood fairway with vintner and former Hollywood mogul Rich Frank and ABC-TV chief Steve McPherson, teaming up to offer one of the auction’s coveted lots — one that included a walk-on role on “Grey’s Anatomy” and an extraordinary wine trip to New Zealand. While Winfrey confessed “Napa Valley is my new favorite place,” she did not bid on any of the live auction’s 44 super lots.

The lot that raised the most money Saturday night was one that barely registered on the radar as the glamorous offerings were put on public display at an auction preview last Friday.

“Fund A Need” underwrites medical care offered by Community Health Clinic Ole, quietly explained one of the agency’s biggest boosters, vintner John Shafer. He told bidders that Clinic Ole — which serves farm workers and area residents with little or no health insurance — had taken care of 20,000 patients last year. He said Auction Napa Valley continues to fund Clinic Ole each year and hoped that bidders could find a little extra in their wallets to do the same.

As a sweetener, Chanel Fine Jewelry provided the top bidder in this lot with a diamond necklace valued at \$40,000.

Bids were taken at levels of \$1,000, \$5,000, \$10,000, \$50,000 and so on, up to the high bid of \$500,000 made by Woodside’s Joy Craft, who, as auctioneer Humphrey Butler clasped the diamond pendant around her neck, told reporters: “This is what I came to do tonight.”

With vintners Mary Miner and the Steffens family offering runner-up bids of \$200,000 and \$300,000, respectively, the Fund A Need lot brought in a total of \$1.7 million for Clinic Ole.

Raising just under \$1 million was the final lot, which celebrates the life of industry icon Robert Mondavi, who passed away a little over three weeks ago just shy of his 95th birthday.

Put together by vintners Garen and Shari Staglin, an event at Copia on June 28 will feature a panel of friends and family discussing the life, wines and contributions of Robert Mondavi, preceded by a reception where a majority of Napa Valley Vintners members will be pouring their wines. Five top-flight chefs from East and West Coast restaurants will prepare a celebratory dinner paired with 17 wines.

Prior to bids being taken, a moving video tribute to Mondavi was screened and his 94-year-old brother, Peter, offered both toast and tribute to Bob and Margrit Mondavi. Taken aback by the sustained applause from all in the tent, the younger Mondavi brother recalled his sibling’s “tremendous energy” and that he wanted “only the best for the wine industry.”

“It’s hard to recall all the things that he did ... and he wasn’t only just for the Napa Valley. We’ll all miss him.”

The lot brought in a total of \$950,000, with 95 people agreeing to pay \$10,000 each for a place at the table.

It took a bit of coaxing from auctioneer Fritz Hatton for the event’s biggest wine lot to tie a record set during the dotcom boom. Previously, a successful dotcomer paid \$500,000 for a six liter bottle of Screaming Eagle, a cult wine made from Oakville fruit. Although this year’s lot offered more wine — six liter bottles of Screaming Eagle from the inaugural 1992 vintage — David Li paid the same amount — half a million dollars — for it. The owner of a cyberspace company located in Shanghai, Li maintains Screaming Eagle is “the best wine in the world.”

The live auction brought in \$8,598,000 this year, with the popular Friday afternoon barrel auction contributing \$1,383,000. The newest adjunct of Auction Napa Valley, the e-auction, netted \$371,203 from online bidding around the world.

Auction’s top lots

While the stock market took a nosedive at the end of last week, unemployment numbers were way up and the price of gasoline topped \$4 a gallon, bidders weren’t shy about raising their bidding paddles. A number of this year’s offerings saw spirited bidding and final numbers that exceeded quiet predictions.

Once again, a lot that incorporated wine and Hollywood soundstages proved a popular attraction. Rich Frank, of Frank Family Vineyards, teamed up with ABC-TV president Steve McPherson to offer a walk-on part in the hit ABC series, “Grey’s Anatomy,” in addition to dinner for four with some of the cast members at Mozza, hosted by chefs Nancy Silverton and Mario Batali. Following the Hollywood events, Frank will whisk the quartet off to New Zealand on an Air New Zealand Business Premiere flight for a week of wine tasting and lavish tastings and dinner parties. Also included in the lot is a five-year vertical of etched magnums of Frank Family’s Winston Hill cabernet sauvignon and a case of 2005 Promise, Frank and McPherson’s new joint venture of small lot cabernet sauvignon.

Auction regulars Jody and Stratton Sclavos, of Saratoga, paid \$480,000 for this lot. When Frank and McPherson first teamed up to make this type offer at the 25th auction in 2005, the Sclavoses were top bidders as well, paying \$300,00 for wine, dinner with Teri Hatcher and a “Desperate Housewives” walk-on.

There was also plenty of interest in the lot offered by Harlan Estate, a ten-magnum vertical of its Bordeaux blend (1995-2004) in a special presentation case, along with a celebratory dinner for eight with vintner Bill Harlan. Auction regular John Thompson teamed up with Paul Wick, both residents of the Peninsula, for the high bid of \$340,000.

St. Helena’s Hi Sang Lee picked up a pair of lots that also prompted a wealth of bids. First was Blackbird Vineyards invitation for four to experience the excitement of a Chanel fashion show in Paris

and to stay in the upscale Hotel Plaza Athénée. While in Paris, the foursome will get a tour of the private apartment of Coco Chanel. Two double magnums of Blackbird's proprietary blend were also included in the lot. Lee ponied up \$300,000 for the Parisian experience.

He also spent \$290,000 on the lot offered by Bryant Family Vineyard. It includes an eight magnum vertical of Bryant Family Vineyard cabernet from 1993 through 2000. On top of that, Lee and five friends will join vintner Don Bryant at a private dinner at his New York City residence, paired with Bryant wines.

In addition to picking up the Chanel necklace, Joy Craft wanted another jewel, five double magnums from Colgin Cellars 2005 harvest — IX Estate Red and Syrah, Tychson Hill Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Cariad Red and Herb Lamb Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. She spent \$260,000 for these gems.

Also among this year's top 10 bids were:

The Chair's Lot, offered by the Heitz family. It provided for exclusive use of the Point, a former Rockefeller Great Camp in the Adirondacks of New York, for eight couples. Heitz Wine Cellars is including roundtrip jet travel between Chicago and the Adirondacks, a dinner and wine tasting with Kathleen Heitz Myers at the luxury camp as well as a number of other meals during the four-day stay. The high bidder from Champaign, Ill., (who preferred to remain anonymous as permitted by auction officials) paid \$240,000 for this excursion.

A dinner party with vintner Naoko Dalla Valle celebrating the return of Maya, a respected Bordeaux blend from Dalla Valle Vineyards, brought in a top bid of \$200,000 from David Reis, of Rye, N.Y. The lot included Maya 2005 in one six-liter bottle and six 750 ml bottles.

Auction officials announced Saturday night that next year's auction will be chaired by the Trefethen family, namely Janet and John and their children, Loren and Hailey.