

VEGAS seven

THE GRAPE NUT



The scene in the barrel tasting room prior to the Premiere Napa Valley wine auction.

Unicorn Hunting in Napa

Premiere Napa Valley rolls out one-of-a-kind barrels for annual auction weekend

By **XANIA WOODMAN**

→ AN ISLAND OF ACTIVITY IN THE SEA OF CALM

That is Napa in winter, Premiere Napa Valley (PremiereNapaWines.com) is a long weekend of tastings, parties and more tastings in February. But at its core, it's an annual barrel auction of epic proportions. Proceeds support Napa Valley Vintners, a nonprofit trade association, in promoting, protecting and enhancing the Napa Valley appellation.

The wines previewed and then live-auctioned before an invite-only audience of licensed wine buyers are utterly unique, not only from any other wine that the specific winery produces, but also from year to year. It might be a blend or an isolation of a clone or vineyard, a stunning vintage or a clever assembly of sub-appellations or unexpected varietals.

But these wines (as few as 60 bottles and never more than 240), can never be replicated—they are the unicorns of the wine world. Some of the wines are thoroughbreds, most appealing because of their makers' reputation, while others are dark horses, whose ul-

timate value is only revealed when the auctioneer's gavel strikes—"Sold!" This was my first time at Premiere Napa Valley, and it proved intoxicating.

I arrived late Thursday night on February 19, just in time to ride (and immediately be tossed from) the mechanical bull at Page Wine Cellars' "Not Our First Rodeo" party with Emerson Brown and FlyWine. "There's a reason the bids get up to \$50,000, even \$100,000: These wines are one of a kind!" said Kale Anderson, winemaker for Pahlmeyer. That winery's 60-bottle lot of "Raison d'Etre" 2013 Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon would sell for a tidy \$30,000 two days later. But there would be much laborious networking, pouring and tasting before that would happen.

It started early the next day at a 9 a.m. blind tasting of 34 Napa cabs from 2003 through 2009 at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone. This was followed by a blind tasting of 2010, 2011 and 2012 cabs from 12 winemakers. Both were selected by a prestigious jury and largely varied only by degrees from

"great" to "really great" to "incredibly great." By 11 a.m. my palate was stripped, my tongue chaffed, my lips purple and raw from spitting—still think this job is glamorous? With my final notes reading "tastes like fermented grape juice," I retreated to the ladies room for a luxuriously protracted teeth-brushing session.

That afternoon the Valley came alive with preview parties. From Napa Town to Calistoga, Howell Mountain to Spring Mountain, the Premiere Napa Valley wines were poured along with current and future releases, in the hopes of attracting buzz. *Can you believe that Mekerra sauvignon blanc by Melka? Did you try the Fairchild Sigaro—it's a Melka.* One name kept coming up.

Legendary winemaker Philippe Melka's portrait dots the auction book 11 times—like the kid in the high school

yearbook who was in every club. At an unofficial portfolio tasting later that day, I found out why.

I say 'unofficial' only because it was not an event set up by Napa Valley Vintners. But any event held at Meadowood Resort, with its three-Michelin-starred restaurant, is official on my itinerary. In a breezy meeting space opening onto the lawn—where just a few years earlier I had learned to sabre sparkling wine bottles with the team from Schramsberg Vineyards—we clustered around tasting tables to meet Melka's numerous clients. His business model as a consulting winemaker is as unique as his auction lots; with degrees in geology, agronomy and enology, Melka is the total package. "In the '90s, I came with a different perspective than other winemakers," he said, seated in the garden. "Plus, all my education came from Bordeaux, where I was very lucky to work with some of the best: Château Haut Brion and [Christian] Moueix of Petrus and Dominus." Lucky, indeed.

Saturday started out foggy, keeping the barrel-tasting room cold and damp until there were enough bodies to warm it. But the sun burned through in time for the main event. Every seat in the auction room was filled. Numbered paddles doubled as fans while we waited for auctioneers David Elswood and Fritz Hatton to take up the gavel. And once they did, they kept a miraculously steady pace with an average of one minute, seven seconds per lot, 225 lots in all. There were some surprises, such as an incredible \$32,000 for debuting FlyWine (high-end wines in TSA-compliant bottles) and a \$70,000

starting bid for Continuum's lot. Melka's wines showed well, with furious bidding for his BRAND Napa Valley label's 60-bottle lot, which sold for the day's high of \$115,000; a total of \$6 million was raised.

But I was not the only Las Vegas in the room! Delmonico Steakhouse wine director Kevin Vogt was there, paddle 68 in hand. In all, he put that paddle up for more than 20 lots. "For me, it's a balance between wanting to support the Napa Valley Vintners association and [the wine] also needs to be sellable in the restaurant and to at least cover the expense," Vogt said after the gavel's last fall.

In the end, Delmonico didn't bring home any lots, but the top bidder of the day was reportedly Total Wine & More. So perhaps we'll see a unicorn in Las Vegas after all. 7

