

# WINE ENTHUSIAST

M A G A Z I N E

## PREMIERE NAPA OFFERS UNIQUE FIRST TASTES OF 2002 AND 2003 VINTAGES

ANNUAL MID-WINTER AUCTION RAISES \$987,200

**O**n February 20, the Napa Valley Vintners Association hosted Premiere Napa, its eighth annual trade tasting and auction, which offered some 500 wine retailers, wholesalers and journalists a taste of red wines to come from Napa Valley. The event raised \$987,200 to be used for marketing and other Association endeavors.

The tasting and auction unfolded in the historic Greystone winery, now the home of the Culinary Institute of America, and featured unique barrel blends from the 2002 and 2003 vintages. These small-lot offerings – often only 5 or 10 cases of wine – were then auctioned off to the trade for eventual sale, or use in other auction events.

The top bid of \$36,000 was for a barrel (20 cases) of Silver Oak Cellars Cabernet that contained a small amount of Merlot from the winery's relatively new Soda Canyon vineyard. That comes to \$150/bottle - \$50 or so more than Silver Oak's normal retail price.

But other high bids topped Silver Oak's when calculated by the bottle. A 5-case lot of Shafer's 2002 Sunspot Vineyard Cab sold for \$28,000, or \$433 per bottle. A 5-case lot of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Heart of Cask 23 sold for \$21,000, which is \$350 per bottle.

With plenty of barrel samples to taste and enough seemingly flush bidders, the festive mood matched the fine wines. Most were selected from the ripe 2002 vintage. However, those wineries that poured barrel



**Mark Pope, owner of Napa's Bounty Hunter, with Bounty Hunter colleague Joan Salyer, and Craig Williams, winemaker at Joseph Phelps Vineyards.**

blends from 2003, such as Volker Eisele Family Estate, demonstrated the excellent potential of Napa Valley's latest vintage, which benefited from a long, sunny and late harvest.

This year's auction may have raised more money than last year's, but it appeared nevertheless that a sluggish economy had left its mark on highflying auction prices. Only a small percentage of the lots achieved the sky-high prices seen in previous years. "If this were the stock market, we'd call it a correction," said Florida wholesaler Jimmy Manbacak of Southern Wine and Spirits.

"Prices are much more in line with market reality," added retailer Mark Pope, of Bounty Hunter Rare Wine & Provisions in Napa. "Not every night is Saturday night for all wine drinkers. And that's what we're seeing today."

The auction culminated in another premier of sorts. After the final gavel, bidders were invited next door to the new Rudd Center for Professional Wine Studies to attend a dedication of the Napa Valley Vintners tasting and teaching room there. "A half million dollars from this event will go to support the Rudd Center," said Napa Valley Vintners Executive Director Linda Reiff. She toasted the occasion with a cool, refreshing glass of sparkling rosé made by Schramsberg, the only winery to present an alternative to red wine at Premiere Napa Valley 2004.

– JEFF MORGAN