

'Another pour, please...'

Abundance of lipsmacking treats at Premiere Napa Valley

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It's a real privilege to be invited to Premiere Napa Valley, to taste and analyze the wines that have attracted so many buyers to the valley from all over the world.

And it's also a challenge.

An auction for the trade, Premiere Napa Valley offers one-of-a-kind wines and special blends only available to retailers, brokers and restaurateurs who capture them with winning bids at this annual mid-winter event.

With 500 members of the trade teaming up with media and vintners, Premiere is always a sold-out affair. And prior to the afternoon auction, everyone gathers in the historic Barrel Room at CIA Greystone to taste what they're about to bid on.

Even though we're not part of the bidding process, it's a treat for wine writers to see what all the fuss is about. Even though we'll probably never get to taste these wines again, it's fun to check out what this talented group of winemakers is up to.

Take the Roy Estate lot, for example. Shirley Roy's wine team includes Philippe Melka — he's making wines and consulting on more wine projects than you could shake a wine thief at — and Aaron Buoncristiani — one of four brothers dedicated to making great wines for a family brand as well as other cellars.

A 2009 cabernet sauvignon from the Soda Canyon property Shirley and her late husband, Charles, purchased from golf legend Johnny Miller, the Roy wine team labeled the 5 case lot, "Voix Basse," French for whisper. They use the term as a metaphor for one of the "voices" evident in the vineyard, as there are two — one prompting a Left Bank approach to winemaking, the other dictating a blend indicative of the Right.

The Voix Basse is all cabernet sauvignon this year, a "WOW" wine that, if you follow the naming logic, is more loud whisper than enological sotto voce. An elegant wine with flavors of black and blue fruit, this is one that needs a couple of years to show off all its attributes, namely layers of fruit and great depth. This is a cab of which all hands can be proud. No wonder the

5-case lot prompted a top bid of \$12,000.

Jay Buoncristiani scored as well with the Buoncristiani Family's 2009 cabernet sauvignon, a JAMN Black and Blue blend of cabernet sauvignon (80 percent) and malbec (20 percent). It's a mouthful of blueberries — big nose, big mid-palate and big, long finish. The brothers "B" rightfully boasted of its "yum factor." If you want to pick up some of this kick-ass blend, you'll have to contact Meritage Wine Market in Encinitas which captured the

5-case lot with a high bid of \$9,000. Let's see, 5 times 12 bottles in a case is 60, and 60 into 9,000 ...

Another wine that earned my "WOW" rating also earned one of the highest bids of the day. Bob Levy's 2009 cabernet franc incorporated a healthy percentage (around 30) of cabernet sauvignon and a soupçon of petit verdot. A harmonious blend of hillside fruit from Franz Valley School Road, it offered a concentrated mouthful of ripe fruit with a mineral backbone. It's an elegant wine — would we expect anything less from the man responsible for the wines of Harlan Estate and Bond. Levy and his wife, Martha McClellan, produce only 500 cases of wine for their label each year. Their inaugural Premiere 5 case lot went for \$40,000.

Oakville met up with Spring Mountain — or what winemaker Luc Morlet maintains is "iron fist meets the silk glove" — with Vineyard 7 & 8's Collaboration. Cabernet sauvignon from Oakville and cabernet from the 2,000 foot elevation of Spring Mountain were blended into a complex wine with sturdy backbone, great depth and long finish — supple, and decidedly elegant. The 10 case lot is going to New Jersey after a top bid of \$20,000.

Winemaker Tres Goetting blended all five Bordeaux varietals grown at Stagecoach Vineyards for the Krupp Brothers Ringo Kid, a

satisfying long, long drink of wine. The taste of ripe black fruit dominated, although the mineral qualities of this acclaimed vineyard were evident, too. With an \$8,000 price tag, this outstanding blend is going to New Jersey as well.

Fruit for Premiere newcomers Henry and Olga Patland's lot also came from Stagecoach Vineyard. And here's consulting winemaker Jay Buoncristiani showing the exceptional layers of cherry, chocolate and cassis evident in this big but elegant wine. Dense with persistent ripe fruit from entry to finish. The 5-case lot brought a top bid of \$6,000.

The only reason winemaker Frederic Delivert didn't add malbec to the Martin Estate lot is because "I don't have any." Yet his collaboration with master sommelier Gilles de Chambure resulted in a rich, velvety blend of cabernet sauvignon (81 percent), merlot (12 percent), petit verdot (6 percent) and cabernet franc (1 percent). A wine with finesse, it has plenty of deep, dark berry flavor. The successful bidder paid \$10,000 for the

5-case lot.

Winemaker Nate Weis produced a heady blend of cabernet sauvignon (85 percent) and malbec (15 percent) for the elegant Antinori estate's 2009 Antica cabernet sauvignon lot — a dense wine with staying power. This is a wine for aging. I guess that's why Napa's Bounty Hunter paid \$14,000 for the 10 case lot.

Tim Mondavi offered attendees "a glimpse of the future" of Continuum wines. His auction blend consisted of fruit harvested on Pritchard Hill, from well established and new vines. Cabernet sauvignon (63 percent), merlot (15 percent), cabernet franc (11 percent) and petit verdot (11 percent) blended into an elegant expression of the place the Mondavi family now calls home. The 5-case lot received a high bid of \$24,000.

Winemaker Ken Bernards' beguiling blend of Coombsville syrah (65 percent) and cabernet sauvignon (35 percent) for Porter Family Vineyards resulted in a rich, ripe, refined expression of both grapes. Lush, drinkable now, the 5-case lot went for \$6,000.

Another Premiere debut tantalized this taster. Rolando Herrera crafted a tasty 2009 cabernet sauvignon, "with a kiss of malbec," for the Gishizky family's Spotted Owl Vineyards. Sweet, ripe fruit in a well-balanced offering with exceptional mid-palate and length, the 5-case wine lot went to Arkansas after a winning bid of \$8,000. Never thought I'd get to Arkansas, but ...

Aaron Pott came up with another yummy blend (80 percent merlot, 15 percent cabernet franc, 5 percent cabernet sauvignon) for Blackbird Vineyards 5-case lot. Loads of black cherries and blackberries from start to finish. Always a lush, elegant blend from the "Bird" clan. Cinq Cas is just delicious. The gang from New Jersey thought so, too, and offered a high bid of \$17,000 for 5 cases.

Other wines we enjoyed:

- Detert Family Vineyards 2009 cabernet franc, the Garrett brothers never disappoint, here a 100 percent cab franc offered layers of fruit, spice and chocolate in a concentrated wine from 32-year-old vines. 5 cases, \$8,000.

- Benessere Last Man Standing, a blend of sangiovese (37 percent) and cabernet sauvignon

(57 percent) with 5 percent petite sirah "to smooth it out," said once-retired winemaker Jack Stuart. A lovely integrated blend.

20 cases, \$7,000.

- Meteor Vineyard, a blend of Coombsville cabernet sauvignon (78 percent) and petit verdot (22 percent) by Dawnine Dyer. A lush expression of these Bordeaux varietals from a temperate/cool climate. A richly textured blend. 5 cases, \$16,000.

- Tres Sabores 2009 Petite Sirah, the first bottling of this varietal from an old established Calistoga vineyard, juicy, soft on the palate, fun and fresh, olives, black fruit and spice. A great wine from Julie Johnson, 5 cases, \$6,000.

All of the information about the wines, including top bids and successful bidders, from the 2010 and 2011 Premiere Napa Valley auctions can be obtained by logging onto premierenapawines.com.