

# WINE FEST

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brought in slightly more than \$5 million. Raising \$5 million for worthwhile causes is no mean feat — especially in the worst economic downturn in memory — but it is a long way from last year's total and from the record \$15.6 million raised the preceding year.

In the end, the deepening recession proved to be an uninvited guest that simply wouldn't go away. From discussions in the men's room ("I talked to a guy last week with the Federal Reserve in Denver, and he said it's going to take some sky-high inflation to get us out of this") to exhortations by auctioneers ("Come on, the market was up last week!"), the specter of economic uncertainty loomed large.

Festival organizers knew what they were up against.

"I think we'll do all right," said Ann Bain, the upbeat chairwoman of the festival's grants committee, on the eve of the auction. "Whatever we raise will be more than what would be available had we done nothing."

A frantic British auctioneer chose to address the dilemma right off the bat. "Do you know what we do with a recession in the United Kingdom?" he asked as he lurched across the stage erected inside an enormous wind-whipped tent on the hotel's grounds. "We put it across our knee and spank the hell out of it!"

The audience's tepid response to this Churchillian call to arms proved prophetic.

Not that the day didn't have its moments. A 10-day Caribbean voyage aboard a 170-yacht fetched \$350,000.

The highest bid for a wine lot came in at \$150,000 for five Magnums of Domaine de la Romaine-Conti.

Lee Anderson, chairman of the St. Paul, Minn.-based API Group, which includes construction, manufacturing and fire-protection companies, was the man who placed the high wine bid.

"Well, it is the best burgundy in the whole world," Mr. Anderson said in discussing his generous purchase. "I may never get around to drinking all of it, but that's all right. It really isn't about the wine. It's about helping the children."

Mr. Anderson made a valid point. Since its founding in 2001, the festival has raised a staggering \$74.5 million to help underprivileged and at-risk children in Collier County. The Naples Children's Education Foundation will distribute this year's funds next month.

While Mr. Fitzgerald may have been off the mark about the very rich, he surely would have appreciated the Gatsby-like moments that invariably accompany such a to-do.

Take, for instance, the middle-aged man holding forth with glass of wine in hand and sunglasses perched atop his graying head. "The older and wealthier I get, the more handsome I seem to become," he announced to a group of young women, whose expressions ranged from mild incredulity to downright disbelief.

At the various serving stations, Ritz-Carlton chefs worked briskly and efficiently to meet the demand for dishes like venison tortellini with parsnip puree, while at the hot dog stand, tucked discretely to the side of the auction tent, business at the noon hour was virtually nonexistent.

"People eat tortellini before noon,



PHOTO COURTESY NAPLES WINTER WINE FESTIVAL

**Bidders at the Naples Winter Wine Festival auction on Saturday, Feb. 7. The event raised \$5 million for children's charities.**

but hot dogs are different story," explained Bill Robinson, a volunteer on duty at the stand. "They eat hot dogs after noon, because that's when ball games are played."

Winning bidders, especially females, often celebrated by with impromptu dances that brought to mind the old days of "American Bandstand."

But for sheer, unbridled enthusiasm, none of the celebrating millionaires or billionaires could match the wine

server who approached a colleague and cut his eyes downward, while saying in a low voice, "Hey, take a look at this."

At waist level, he held a \$20 bill, discretely stretched between his two hands. A tip from a satisfied patron.

"Awright!" exclaimed the colleague.

The two exchanged vigorous high-fives before the well-tipped server roared off in pursuit of another hard-earned double sawbuck. ■

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