

first press



The Masters. Seated left to right: Doug Frost, Master Sommelier/Master of Wine, Full Circle Wine Solutions (Prairie Village, KS); Liz Thach, Master of Wine, Sonoma State University (Rohnert Park, CA); Keith Goldston, Master Sommelier (Capella, Washington, DC). Standing left to right: Bob Paulinski, Master of Wine, BevMo! (Concord, CA); Sandy Block, Master of Wine, Legal Sea Foods (Boston, MA); John Szabo, Master Sommelier, WineAlign (Toronto, ON). Not pictured: Evan Goldstein, Master Sommelier, Full Circle Wine Solutions (San Francisco, CA).

MASTERY in the Making

THE SONOMA BARREL AUCTION LOTS
ARE VETTED BY INDUSTRY MASTERS



by Deborah Parker Wong / photos by John Curley

Bagged and numbered bottles of some exemplary lots from the first day of tasting found their way to the table. Dinner was hosted at the Crown House, the private residence of Rodney Strong vintner Tom Klein.



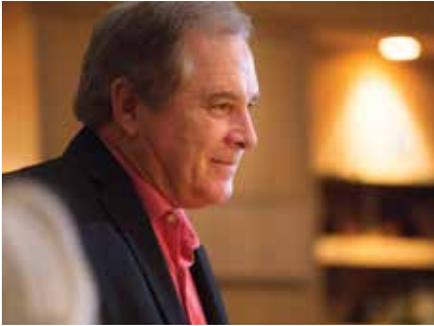
PREPARATIONS FOR SONOMA COUNTY'S SECOND ANNUAL BARREL AUCTION are well underway. Slated as a live auction of curated wine futures from the county's top growers and winemakers, proceeds from the auction which takes place on April 29 at the Vintners Inn in Santa Rosa support the marketing efforts of the Sonoma County Vintners.

With a greater number of lots being offered and more than half of last year's bidders already signed on, Carolyn Stark, director of the Sonoma County Vintners, is optimistic, "There has been early interest in the auction this year and we believe they will be wowed again by the quality and diversity of our Sonoma County wines." Stark intends to improve on the format by combining smaller AVA preview events to better accommodate producers and buyers. "Maintaining value for the trade is important," said Barbara Cox, director of marketing and communications for the Sonoma County Vintners. "They can then offer these world-class wines to their clients and collectors."

After last year's hugely-successful inaugural event in which 71 lots were auctioned to raise \$461,700, the wheels have been set in motion as an elite jury of masters assembled to evaluate potential lots in a search for quality. The two lots that tied for the highest bid of \$24,000 in 2015 were both Pinot Noir blends: a Russian River Valley Swan Selection named "The Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost" from the trio of Joseph Swan Vineyards, Kosta Browne Winery, and Williams Selyem Winery, and Williams Selyem Reverence, a blend of seven different heritage clones from 10 of the most prestigious vineyards in the Russian River Valley. Glen Knight of The Wine House in Los Angeles and Drew Goodgame of Porthos Wine Ventures in Sausalito won the lots respectively.



As a Master of Wine and a Master Sommelier, panelist Doug Frost has the distinction of holding the two most-coveted titles in the wine industry.



Head Winemaker Rick Sayre has directed winemaking at Rodney Strong since 1979.



Carmen Castaldi, Senior Vice President of Sales & Marketing for Rodney Strong Wine Estates, (seated) enjoys winemaker Rick Sayre's recollection of André Tchelistcheff.

"It was great to see that some winemakers had clearly taken the mandate of a 'never before, never again' lot seriously, using the opportunity to overrun the edges of the style box. A good handful of the lots submitted are intriguing, experimental and innovative, in addition to delicious, which serves to underscore the diversity of Sonoma County wines, surely the most varied region in the U.S."
—panelist John Szabo, MS

Pinot Noir may be the region's calling card but "anything Sonoma" can and is submitted for evaluation. Given the diversity of wine styles found across the county, the selection of lots representing the highest-quality examples involved a considerable amount of discussion on behalf of the panelists. Evan Goldstein, MS assembled a jury of six fellow Master Sommeliers and Masters of Wine, themselves members of the licensed wine trade as retailers, restaurateurs, importers, distributors or opinion-leading academics.

"Having a panel of this caliber is an opportunity for the wineries to put their best foot forward," said Goldstein. "Knowing that the wines have been vetted also inspires confidence in the trade."

Goldstein was joined by Sandy Block, MW, of the iconic Legal Sea Foods in Boston, MA; Doug Frost, MS/MW, Full Circle Wine Solutions, Prairie Village, KS; Keith Goldston, MS, Capella, Washington, DC; Bob Paulinski, MW, BevMo!, Concord, CA; John Szabo, MS, WineAlign, Toronto, ON; and Dr. Liz Thach, MW, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

Held over a period of two days, the tastings were designed to give each lot a chance to show at its best. Working at a large, round table the panel allowed for two rounds of discussion—one qualitative and one quantitative, based on scores. Armed with vintage and varietal composition, they scored the wines using Goldstein's preferred scale of one to ten and commented on each lot. "When we have the opportunity to taste with our peers, it really pushes and informs our palates," said Goldstein. "When someone asks us what the vintage was like, we've had firsthand experience with the wines."

Debates about the merits of style versus typicity and the interests of trade buyers revealed that even technical assessments of quality are rarely black and white. "Our goal was consensus," said Keith Goldston, MS. The auction's emphasis on wines that reflect terroir authenticity, varietal correctness and a true representation of Sonoma County by appellation cannot be understated. "We're definitely taking into consideration where the barrel samples are at in this stage of their development, their typicity and average score," said Bob Paulinski MW, Senior Vice President Of Wine for Concord-based retailer BEVMO!

When panelists assembled for dinner hosted by the team at Rodney Strong Vineyards at the Crown House, the private residence of vintner Tom Klein, bagged and numbered bottles of some exemplary lots from the first day of tasting found their way to the table. Between courses prepared by Rodney Strong winery chef Tara Wachtel that were flawlessly paired with a selection of estate and single vineyard wines crafted by Director of Winemaking Rick Sayre and Winemaker Justin Seidenfeld, glimpses of what buyers can anticipate emerged.

"It's funny how much we liked the Chardonnays," said Frost. "I think you could say we're Chardonnay enthusiasts." With a greater number of white wine lots entered this year, not surprisingly the panel pointed to consistency and purity in the region's cool climate Chardonnays. Sayre, whose 2013 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay was poured to accompany a composed salad of Dungeness crab, avocado, béarnaise and pea tendrils, said, "If you're in this business, you'd better be passionate and it's a tough job for passionate people to achieve consensus."

Like his mentor André Tchelistcheff, Sayre, who is constantly striving to improve wine quality, attributes quality gains in the vineyard to the adoption of new technologies including multi-spectral imagining that allows him to precisely time picking decisions and to pick a vineyard by area. The winery's 2009 Alexander's Crown, 2010 Brothers and 2012 Rockaway single vineyard Cabernet Sauvignons served as a trio with Wachtel's entrée of steak carpaccio, coffee-rubbed, sous vide strip steak and oxtail empanada were a testament to his pursuit.

"We saw a lot of consensus around the Cabernet Sauvignon lots," said Block and the nodding heads of Thach and Frost confirmed they had found some common ground.

"Their hard work directly informs the lots that will be offered at auction," said Cox. The SCV will advise wineries of the status of their lots in February after a secondary tasting with local panelists Bob Paulinski, MW and Liz Thach, MW. ❧