

# A Glass Half Full At Auction Napa Valley—Why Wineries Are Positive About The Future

Though global wine sales have declined, many wineries at the 2026 Auction Napa Valley expressed optimism about the future amid much excitement over innovation and ‘fresh energy’ in Napa Valley.

By [Liz Thach, MW](#), Contributor.



This past weekend marked the 45th annual Auction Napa Valley, which attracted a record attendance of more than 2,000 people and raised \$6 million for charity over the three-day event. While slightly below last year's \$6.5 million in proceeds, the total was still significantly higher than the \$4.8 million raised in 2024.

Both attendees and winery professionals appeared to be in a jubilant mood, reflecting a ‘wine glass half full’ perspective rather than the more pessimistic

‘glass half empty’ view. Throughout the [three days of events](#)—including winery dinners, the barrel auction at the newly renovated Robert Mondavi Winery, and the live auction and dinner celebration at Inglenook Estate—participants enjoyed sunny weather and contributed generously to charitable causes.

Despite [slumping sales](#) in some areas of the global wine industry (recent [NielsenIQ](#) statistics show wine dollar sales down 4.8%, with volume down 6.4%), many of the Napa Valley winemakers and owners I spoke with remain positive about the future. Some reported that their wine sales are up this year, while others described sales as flat or ‘slightly below flat,’ but overall, the mood remained decidedly optimistic.

Throughout the interviews, three themes consistently emerged: 1) Renewal and Innovation; 2) Legacy and Passion for Quality; and 3) Community and Shared Experience.



Renewal and Innovation in Napa Valley

A common theme that emerged throughout the interviews was the freedom to innovate by planting new and unique grape varieties, experimenting with lower-alcohol wines, and crafting lighter, more elegant Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons.

For example, Jesse Giacomelli, owner of Copper Bear Wines, told me: "There is chaos in the market now, but what's great about this time is there so much opportunity to experiment and try different things. For example, we have launched a low alcohol Sauvignon Blanc and are doing some fun things with Albarino grapes. There is a lot of buzz and excitement at this time. It's almost like Napa Valley is reinventing itself."

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Another young winemaker, Gabe Altman, assistant winemaker for Tom Eddy Winery, known for its elegant mountain Cabernet Sauvignons, told me, "We have just released this really cool Grenache Blanc, and the grapes are from the only vineyard in Napa Valley that grows this varietal. I feel very confident in the future, because I work in a smaller winery with an artisan focus."

**"There is a lot of buzz and excitement at this time. It's almost like Napa Valley is reinventing itself."**

Jesse Giacomelli, Owner of Copper Bear Wines in Napa Valley

Another winery known for innovation in Napa Valley is The Vice, which was among the first Napa Valley wineries to produce orange wine, as well as a range of lighter-style white, rosé, and red wines from Napa Valley grapes.

"Our business is booming, and so are the private-label wines we create for other brands," said Torie Greenberg, co-owner of The Vice. "We are using a different business model, where we don't own vineyards or winemaking equipment, and make our unique and fresh styles of wine at custom-crush winemaking facilities."

The theme of renewal also extends to the many newcomers and young adults who attended the auction weekend for the first time. There was a sense of appreciation for the fresh energy these participants bring, helping the auction evolve while maintaining its traditions.



Legacy and Passion for Quality in Napa Valley

Despite the innovation occurring throughout Napa Valley, there remains a deep respect for legacy brands and an ongoing commitment to maintaining and enhancing wine quality.

Sarah Zineski, senior associate winemaker with Duckhorn Wine Company, shared: "Duckhorn is rooted in legacy. We are celebrating our 50th anniversary, and we are here through the ups and downs. We are going to continue to deliver what our legacy customers expect, while at the same time looking at more white wines and alternatives."

Another legacy brand that appears to be thriving is Shafer Vineyards. Elias Fernandez, head winemaker at Shafer, was excited to attend the auction. "Sharing the *2024 Shafer Hillside Select* vintage was a thrill. There's no better feeling than watching people taste it for the first time."

Fernandez also noted that he has attended the auction since 1981 and has witnessed many of its highs and lows. "What got me most wasn't the regulars — it was the new faces in every corner of the room. That kind of fresh energy is exactly what the early days felt like."

I also spoke with Shaina Harding and Aaron Pott, winemakers at Blackbird Vineyards. "Our sales are actually growing and we are very excited about the future," said Harding. Pott added that Blackbird will continue to focus on producing high-quality wines with a "purity of fruit and elegance," achieved by selecting only the very best grapes for its Right Bank-inspired wines.

So, despite the fact that many wineries are experimenting with new varieties and lighter styles, Napa Valley producers remain relentlessly focused on crafting wines of the highest quality for longtime customers, collectors, and future generations.

## Supporting the Napa Community and Shared Experience

Another theme that ran throughout this year's auction—and one that has existed since its founding—is Napa Valley's commitment to supporting the local community.

Wineries donate barrels and/or cases of wine and open their doors to host dinners and other experiences for visitors as part of Auction Napa Valley. There is a sense of being in this together, regardless of market conditions. Napa Valley Vintners has long fostered a strong feeling of community connection, and the pride in that shared purpose was evident throughout the weekend.

"It's the fifth major downturn since I've been a winemaker in Napa Valley," Tom Eddy, owner of Tom Eddy Winery, told me. Eddy graduated with a degree in enology from UC Davis in 1974 and has worked in the wine industry ever since.

"I am very positive about the future, because there is always going to be a place in the world for fine wine and food. The goal with events like the auction is to get people to come back to Napa Valley, and that makes me feel good and gives me hope," he said.

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Tom Eddy, Owner of Tom Eddy Wines in Napa Valley

Tim Mondavi, co-owner of Continuum Estate and son of Robert Mondavi, summed up the themes of community and optimism particularly well.

“Fifty harvests have taught me that Napa’s strength has never come from a single great year. It comes from the people who show up every time. We have benefitted from being a dynamic community of passionate professionals, with a shared love for honoring nature, great food and great wine and building a community of mutual respect,” said Tim Mondavi.

He added that his father, Robert Mondavi, was one of the people who helped launch the Napa Valley Wine Auction in 1981.

“When I look at this community today, I see that same conviction—people showing up, investing in their neighbors, striving for excellence, and planning for the future. That’s what makes me optimistic,” concluded Mondavi.

Tim Mondavi’s winery, Continuum Estate, donated one of the highest-grossing barrel auction lots of the year, along with Shafer Vineyards. Other top-grossing lots included Alpha Omega, [Chappellet Vineyard](#), Cardinale, Davies Vineyards, Favia, Joseph Phelps Vineyards, OVID, and Napa Valley—Robert Mondavi Winery.

To support the Napa community, the money raised from Auction Napa Valley is directed to the Napa Valley Vintners Youth Wellness Initiative, which funds school and community wellness centers, after-school and summer programs, and parent education throughout Napa County.

Since its founding, Auction Napa Valley has raised more than \$245 million to support the Napa Valley community. The continued success of this year's event suggests that even amid industry challenges, Napa Valley's spirit of

innovation, commitment to quality, and dedication to community remain as strong as ever.





By [Liz Thach, MW](#)

Dr. Liz Thach, MW, is a wine writer based in Napa and Sonoma, California. Her writing focuses on global wine business strategy, marketing and wine lifestyle stories. She covers wine CEOs and successful wine businesses, such as ['How Total Wine & More Became the Largest U.S. Wine Retailer](#), as well as hot trends in wine, like [7 Sophisticated Sauvignon Blancs from Napa and Sonoma](#). Liz has also published nine wine books, several of which received top awards, including *Gourmand's Hall of Fame Best Book Award* for [Luxury Wine Marketing](#). In addition to writing, Liz serves as President of Wine Market Council and teaches wine classes part-time at Stanford Continuing Education. Liz holds a Ph.D. in Human Resource Development from Texas A&M University and became a Master of Wine (MW) in May 2011, after passing the most rigorous wine exam in the world.

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