

“Sandestin Wine Festival” for *Sandestin Living Magazine*

By Sallie W. Boyles

Whether intricately mastered or barely understood, the art of wine tasting—see, swirl, sniff, sip and spit—is, quite simply, a pleasure at the Sandestin Wine Festival. From the idyllic waterside location to the shared passion of its organizers, the broadly appealing and enriching experience now attracts 2,500 visitors with a showcase of 800 wines from 19 countries around the globe. Like the star-studded wine festivals of Napa Valley and South Beach, the Sandestin Wine Festival has attained world-class standing—an impressive feat for such a seemingly casual affair. Hosted at The Village of Baytowne Wharf, the event is more than a resort-friendly celebration of wine and food; above all, it reflects the spirit of a far-reaching community.

Growing organically over the past 25 years, the festival—a three-day weekend held at the end of April—now operates in some capacity fulltime behind the scenes. The official kickoff occurs in January, when an invited panel of food writers, chefs, restaurateurs, and college professors gather to judge wines for the upcoming festival. Area distributors choose the bottles that are critiqued in a blind taste test. In 2011, the panel was divided up to taste 63 different categories of wines with eight bottles represented in each group. “Every year we add a new category,” says Chan Cox, festival founder and proprietor of Wine World. Informing wine lovers of innovative varieties and emerging trends has, indeed, become an important function of the festival. This year’s notable addition is a Gruner Veltliner, a white wine grape cultivated in Germany that has more recently attracted the interest of Australian growers.

While the judging adds an element of excitement, it also serves as a guide. From each category, one gold, silver and bronze medal winner is awarded, and if the price of the gold medal bottle falls below the average for its group, it is distinguished as a best value. “Predictably, the most expensive bottles tend to rise to the top, but not always,” says Lanier Motes, Event Manager for The Village of Baytowne Wharf. “A gold medal winner could be valued at eight dollars or two hundred.” From the top choices in each category, the full judging panel selects a best of show red and white. The current year’s outstanding red and white wines are a 2007 Bodegas Caro from the Southern Hemisphere and a 2009 Rombauer Napa Valley Chardonnay, respectively. The Sandestin Wine Festival further publishes an annual wine tasting guide that has become a bible for festival goers as well as a handy online reference for countless connoisseurs.

For the first time ever, in tribute to the festival’s silver anniversary, Charles Krug Winery introduces a 2008 Sandestin Curvee. Indeed, a double toast is in order, as 2011 also marks a milestone for the winery, which celebrates its 150th year in business. The commemorative bottle of Curvee further represents a friendship between the Mondavi family, owners of the Krug Winery since the 1940s, and Chan Cox, who developed an interest in wine as a sales trainee for a wholesaler right out of college. The connection took root twenty-five years ago when Cox was growing his wine business and Peter

Mondavi was just entering his family's enterprise. A phone call to arrange their meeting is what planted the seed for the Sandestin Wine Festival.

"Out of the blue, one of my winery representatives from California informed me that Robert Mondavi wanted his son, Peter, a recent graduate of Stanford, to visit my market," Cox remembers. The rep, in fact, wondered if Cox would entertain the idea of hosting a wine festival. It would grant Peter introductions to people in the industry while educating Northwest Florida about Krug Winery. Pondering the idea, Cox was intrigued but skeptical. "Sandestin was an infant resort," he says, "and the level of wine sophistication here was unimpressive. I didn't even know what a wine festival was supposed to look like." Despite his reservations, Cox accepted the challenge. "I had a store in The Market Shops at Sandestin, so that's where we started out."

"The turnout was huge," says Cox. "The Louisiana Bar Association was in town, and a rainstorm blew them off the beach!" Although bad weather had a hand in its success that first year, Cox believed in the festival's potential. Finding a better way to exploit the local weather, he shifted the event to late April, when the clear skies and moderate temperatures entice visitors to Destin. Moving inside the gates of Sandestin also enhanced the festival's structure by creating a contained venue with space to spread out. It also made the resort a true partner.

"To me, it's a perfect spring weekend," says John Russell, President of Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. "Festival guests can take advantage of numerous vacation packages with golf, dining, and beach activities."

Multi-faceted elements of the festival further attract a broad base of attendees who have different goals for the weekend. It can be a girls' getaway, a couple's escape, a change of pace for young professionals, or a carefully orchestrated occasion for wine and food aficionados. Just as one person is thrilled with an inexpensive chocolate wine while another sticks to the serious labels, festival goers approach the event with varied attitudes and agendas.

Seminars, covering topics such as food and travel, and wine dinners, hosted in area restaurants by celebrity chefs and wine makers, are reserved for Friday evening. Tastings take place on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, and are intermingled with live music, food and shopping. Retail items designed especially for the festival include collectable wine glasses, charms, posters, and monogrammed gifts. Of course, wine that is sampled is also available for sale by the bottle.

"Come on Friday and attend some seminars," says Cox. "Pick up a wine tasting guide. You obviously can't taste 800 wines, so have a game plan." Over 100 wineries with their vintners and representatives occupy 100 10'x10' tents. To navigate the options, Cox suggests tasting reds on one day and whites on the other, and taking breaks to enjoy the food.

Upon adding a widely popular culinary pavilion three years ago, organizers decided to spice things up in 2011 by giving the event a Spanish theme that pairs the country's wine and food treasures. An array of cheeses, meats, olives, tapas and baguettes were selected to whet the appetite for a main course of paella, followed by gourmet desserts to finish. "We'll invite more celebrity chefs, add more cooking demonstrations next year," says Cox, who is already planning ahead.

By building upon the original foundation year after year, the festival's popularity and sophistication have blossomed along with that of its participants and patrons. "It's a perfect marriage between businesses that need to market their wines and customers who want to be informed," says Russell.

A separate but vital structure, the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation (DCWAF), was added in 2005. Assuming a prominent role, the festival's charitable component now functions year-round to serve children in dire need. "Our festival patrons, who have a great love of wine and food, appreciate that we place them in a position to help children," says Russell, who is also President of the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation. Likewise, enthusiastic levels of participation by vintners, chefs, restaurateurs and others from around the world make the auction uniquely spectacular and, therefore, successful.

Annual fundraising begins in January with the festival's wine judging event. "Left with hundreds of bottles of partially consumed wine, we sell tickets, \$50 apiece, to pour the rest in a Wine Walkabout after the day's judging," says Todd Vuovich, DCWAF Executive Director. "Live entertainment completes the celebration." Though the event is profitable, the most significant fundraising arises from the auction itself.

The wine auction is open to those who purchase a special patron package. It not only permits entry to the exclusive auction, but also grants coveted access to an extraordinary wine dinner.

"On Friday evening of the festival, we'll have 15 wine dinners, each hosting 20 to 50 patron guests, occurring simultaneously in the beautiful private homes of our supporters," says Vuovich. "Every dinner will feature a five-course gourmet meal prepared by a celebrity chef." The chef, in turn, is partnered with a vintner, who appoints wine for each course. "The wine is highly allocated from each vintner's reserves," Vuovich adds.

With the morning to relax, the much anticipated Destin Charity Wine Auction begins on Saturday afternoon. For the resort casual event, celebrity chefs from the area demonstrate and serve their specialties, which, in turn, are paired with distinctive wines poured by internationally acclaimed vintners. Heralded by food, wine and live music, the silent auction is the evening's grand finale.

"From rare wines to once-in-a-lifetime trips, the auction grants access to opportunities that otherwise would not exist," says Vuovich. One such trip for 2011 takes eight to Umbria and Tuscany with behind-the-scenes tours of wineries and exclusive dinners, all

while staying in a private country cottage. Another trip transports six via a private jet to a three-bedroom suite at the Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman. To make each opportunity one-of-a-kind, a number of packages include places at the tables of renowned chefs and dinner invitations to vintners' homes.

For most who participate, ultimate satisfaction comes with the knowledge that their contributions support meaningful children's causes, as each undergoes a rigorous vetting process. "Every year we adopt beneficiary charities based upon their mission," Vucovich explains. "Their projects must reflect a criticality of need." Types of programs funded include crisis counseling and shelters for abused children, essential medical equipment, dental care for those who cannot afford it, and housing. As an example of how donations impact individuals, he mentions siblings in foster care who have been united because DCWAF built a home for them.

Benefactors and beneficiaries alike recognize the young organization's remarkable stewardship. "By relying heavily on our member volunteers to keep our operational costs low, we deliver 75 percent of our proceeds to the causes we support," says Vucovich. In 2010, despite the oil spill and an especially challenged local economy, the Foundation issued checks for \$864,000. "Our goal for 2011 is to give one million," adds Russell.

"Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort has been integral to the Foundation's success since its inception," offers Vucovich. "With John Russell and his staff, our relationship with the resort has transcended a partnership; we're friends working towards a common cause, to help Emerald Coast children in need."

In essence, the camaraderie that Vucovich and others describe also explains the endurance of the Sandestin Wine Festival and even sets the tone of the event. A love of wine, in fact, is what launched an unexpected kinship between Destin and Napa Valley 25 years ago, and, since then, has fostered enduring friendships among wine merchants, wine growers, chefs, restaurateurs, hospitality professionals and consumers from around the world.

Preparing to board a plane to South Africa to tour the wine country of that emerging market, Cox sees the wine world as inclusive, not exclusive. "It's all about bringing people together," he says, "to share a love of wine and food."
