

# Wine and nonprofits: the best pairing on the Central Coast

The era of charity golf tournaments and awkward hotel dinner fundraisers are as out of style as knee-high argyle socks. Today's Central Coast nonprofits have tapped into a resource overflowing with classy products, unique facilities and people with time to donate: local wineries.

With vineyards flushed with budding grapes, many tri-county wineries are pairing up with nonprofits this summer and fall not just to help worthy causes, but to build their brands and introduce new audiences to their products.

"We get donation requests from all over the world daily. We could donate our entire inventory," said Jac Jacobs, winemaker at Sylvester Winery in Paso Robles. Jacobs said his winery helps about 30 to 40 charities and, in the process, donates as many as 600 bottles of wine annually.

## FROM BOTTLES TO BUCKS

Exactly how nonprofits use wineries to raise funds varies almost as much as the wine itself. While San Luis Obispo's Family Care Network will have Sylvester Winery and a dozen others pour wine at its more traditional food, wine and auction event on Sept. 14, the Central Coast Wine Classic takes a much different approach.

This four-day event, which was held in July, kicks off with the tasting of unre-

leased wine from 50 California wineries followed by a dinner at Hearst Castle – with a ticket price of \$1,250 per person.

"The winery nexus is something that really works to make the whole thing a symbiotic unit because food and wine as lifestyle enhancements are very appealing to a certain demographic audience," said Archie McLaren, Central Coast Wine Classic's founder and chairman. "Wineries want to reach that demographic audience and the audience wants to reach that wine."

McLaren said since 2003, the Wine Classic has donated \$1 million to arts-related charities along the Central Coast.

The New West Symphony takes a similar approach with its single-day event Sept. 21.

"If you don't at the end of this evening feel like you've had one of the greatest times of your life, then we aren't doing our jobs," said event chair Karl Klessig.

At the Symphony of Wine Dinner & Auction, which helps 15,000 Ventura County children access the arts, only "crème de la crème" wines are served from 30 to 40 popular and boutique wineries. Klessig said that this year, Robert Pecota Winery is donating a 15-liter bottle of its 1991 merlot, "which one person cannot lift," to the auction event.

Since the Symphony of Wine Dinner

& Auction started eight years ago, the event has raised \$1 million.

So why is the combination of wine and philanthropy so powerful?

Many wineries and nonprofits I spoke to all said roughly the same thing: it's a purely win-win situation for all those involved.

"It provides brand awareness for [wineries] but it also shows engagement in the community," said John Haro, marketing director for the Flamenco Arts Festival, which paired up with the Santa Barbara Winery Aug. 1 for a fundraising event at the winery's Santa Ynez facilities.

"A lot of people who didn't know we were here knew we were here this way," said Suzanne Fitzgerald, tasting manager at the Santa Barbara Winery. The winery waived the facilities and rental fees when it hosted the Flamenco Arts fundraiser, something every winery interviewed echoed. The wineries aren't skimpy when they donate – they donate not just their wine but their time, their staff and often their facilities.

Moreover, having a fundraiser that involves wine is often more engaging for attendees than the standard dinner-auction setup. As a result, nonprofits can charge more for the tickets, as guests know they'll be poured expensive wine and often have the chance to chat up any winemakers and owners in attendance.



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## WHEN THE BIGGEST COMBINE

Every June, Casa Pacifica raises hundreds of thousands of dollars at its Wine & Food Festival, an outdoor event that draws 3,500 people to an "all you can eat and drink" event at California State University, Channel Islands – the only venue it found big enough to hold all the vendors and guests.

At its June 1 event, Opus One, Opolo, Cantara Cellars, Herzog Wine Cellars and dozens of others poured 150 varieties of wines.

And everything was donated.

Going into its 16th year in 2009, "it's just gotten progressively bigger and bigger. It started out as a little backyard garden party," said Carrie Hughes, assistant director of development at Casa Pacifica. This year, the Camarillo-based nonprofit raised a net pull of \$190,000, its most ever.

Tri-county nonprofits are discovering that they're luckier than they realized when they first opened their doors. These charities undoubtedly have access to some of the best fundraising opportunities the United States has to offer.

"Wine's really kind of a magical thing," Jacobs said, "and people appreciate it and it's something that, we find in the industry, we'll do anything it takes to raise some money for whatever charity we're trying to work with."

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