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GABE SAGLIE: Vintners give back: Biennial auction spotlights SB's Direct Relief

Gabe Saglie

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Direct Relief often flies under the radar. Its nonprofit, nongovernmental and nonsectarian outreach efforts — delivering critical medical supplies to areas around the world stricken by emergencies or poverty — aren't always front-page news. But its impact is indisputable: Last year, Forbes ranked Direct Relief among the top 10 charities in the U.S.

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The Goleta-based group's local efforts recently become evident, too, as it jumped into action without hesitation during the Thomas Fire and the deadly mudslides that followed. It mobilized staff on the ground to aid first responders. And it distributed 90,000 breathing masks and spearheaded medical response for hundreds of displaced residents in conjunction with the Santa Barbara County Public Health and Emergency Services departments.

The good work of Direct Relief is something that the Santa Barbara Vintners Foundation has lauded for a long time. It's why the charitable umbrella of Santa Barbara Vintners, which represents more than 100 local wineries and vineyards, puts on one of the area's most lavish wine events in Direct Relief's honor. Since 2000, the Santa Barbara Wine Auction has raised more than \$4.5 million.

With Direct Relief's legendary knack for leveraging its relationships within the medical and transportation industries — every dollar donated translates to \$30 in medicines and services distributed worldwide — that's philanthropy to the tune of \$135-plus million! "Do the math!" vintner Frank Ostini once told me; he's helped produce the auction since its inception. "It just makes us feel good."

The next Santa Barbara Wine Auction takes places later this month, on Feb. 17, at the Ritz-Carlton Bacara Resort. The elegant evening will be emceed by celeb TV host Chris Harrison (of "The Bachelor" franchise fame) and feature live entertainment by the Bryan Titus Trio. Pioneer Santa Barbara winemaker Fred Brander will be given the Vintner of the Year award.

Each dinner table will be hosted by two local winemakers who will pour hand-selected wines throughout the gourmet four-course meal. Bacara's new executive chef, Umit Kaygusuz, will host Guest Chef John Cox, who's quickly created culinary buzz as executive chef at the Parker family's new The Bear and Star restaurant in Los Olivos. The auction menu will reflect Mr. Cox's refined ranch cuisine driven by a micro-regional focus.

The 2018 Santa Barbara Wine Auction will feature both silent and live auctions, with an emphasis on exclusive lifestyle and culinary lots. Among them: "Blend Your Own Barrel," a custom blend-and bottle experience for four hosted by Brander And Beckmen vineyards and including two nights at ForFriends Inn in Santa Ynez and dinner at Buellton's The Hitching Post II Restaurant; a one-week stay for six in a three-bedroom villa at the Four Seasons Peninsula Papagayo Resort in Costa Rica; a Private Luxury Suite for 12 at crooner Sam Smith's Aug. 28 concert at L.A.'s Staples Center, complete with food and beverage; two nights for two couples at Ritz-Carlton Bacara's Penthouse Suite, along with two couples' massages and dinner at Angel Oak restaurant; and "Wild Wild West," a luxury cowboy campout for 12 at Alisal Guest Ranch in Solvang, with horseback rides, a barbecue dinner and wine pairing.

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The Santa Barbara Vintners' Diamond Anniversary Collection lot, a secret wine lover's once-in-a-lifetime offering comprised of donations from the entire Santa Barbara Vintners membership, will be revealed live at the event.

For information on table sponsorships, contact event manager Jen Jones via email at jjones@directrelief.org and check out www.sbwineauction.org.

Wine lover Gabe Saglie is senior editor for www.travelzoo.com. His column appears every other week in the Food section. Email him at gabesaglie@yahoo.com or follow him on Twitter @GabeSaglie.

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