At the dawn of the second millennium, the Napa Valley Vintners Association (“NVVA”) hosted its twentieth annual Napa Valley Wine Auction at the Meadowood resort. The gala attracted more than 1,800 guests who paid $2,500 per couple and another 1,000 volunteers who offered their services in exchange for an opportunity to rub elbows with the elite. In the process, the NVVA raised $9.5 million for local charities. A retired Silicon Valley executive and first-time participant spent $1.7 million in bids on five auction lots, perhaps buying prestige as much as fermented grape juice. His single largest purchase, $500,000 for an imperial (six liters) of 1992 Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon, constituted a record for a single bottle of wine at the time. Another guest, a ten-year auction veteran, bid $700,000 for a vertical vintage, or ten 1.5 liter bottles spanning the first decade of the Harlan Estate. Over two decades, the auction had become part of a larger phenomenon. By 2003, festivities covered four days and involved more than 100 events at different wineries, events that asked their patrons to dress up in “supper club swank” or “Academy-award glamorous.”

The wine auction seemingly stood in stark contrast to earlier NVVA efforts in terms of its sophistication and imagery. Almost 50 years earlier, for example, the pavilion of the Napa County fairgrounds provided the setting when the NVVA greeted some 2,000 representatives of the General Electric Company. The event afforded the winemakers an opportunity to introduce the visitors to the products of Napa Valley. Formed during World War II, the NVVA had initiated a long-range public relations campaign to distinguish Napa’s best wines from inferior California vintages and to establish new markets for them. In addition to opening their wineries to tourists, the NVVA members hoped to lure sophisticated and affluent consumers and to educate them in the finer aspects of wine. They invited San Francisco conventioneers such as the American Medical Association, the Western Conference of Bankers, and the Associated Harvard Clubs, arranging winery tours and a luncheon for 600 alumni of the Ivy League standard bearer. The General Electric gathering in 1952 stands out for neither its logistics nor size, although it was the largest event in the NVVA’s first decade. In retrospect, it captures our attention because of the nature of the affair - an old-fashioned, western-style barbecue. Conventioneers and Napans sat at picnic tables lined across the dirt of the floor of the pavilion, which was draped in the red, white, and blue bunting common to most American county fairs. With neither artifice nor pretension, they donned cowboy hats, spangled shirts, bolo ties, and kerchiefs to dine at the plebeian fairgrounds. Napa Valley wines accompanied grub reminiscent of the greater American West.

Life in the Napa Valley seemingly had moved far away from bolo ties and kerchiefs in that half century, but in other ways these elite auctions simply constituted the successful extension of the direct marketing strategies that brought Napa wines international renown. Damaged by a thirteen-year Prohibition and the difficulties presented by the Depression and World War II, Napa’s wine industry struggled to gain recognition among domestic imbibers and to push its way into international markets. Before Prohibition, few American consumers drank wine, and many of those who had enjoyed it, lost their affinity for quality products when they were
exposed to poorly made, albeit legal, home vintages during Prohibition and the overly sweet, fortified wines created from poor grapes following Repeal. After the war, NVVA members returned to crafting fine wines, building on a strong, if not dominant tradition among the valley’s earlier, pre-Prohibition generation of winemakers. They could not, at the time of the NVVA formation in 1943, foresee the wine revolution that would later sweep the United States, but they nonetheless committed themselves to a program of quality production.

Napa’s vintners turned to public tasting rooms and special events as a way to directly reach their customers and to educate those customers’ palates. Nappers played the leading role in developing this type of American wine tourism. In the most basic sense, tourism is a form of consumer behavior. Internal motives drive consumer choices. As historian Hal Rothman concludes, “tourism, through which people acquire intangibles - experience, cachet, proximity to celebrity - became the successor to industrial capitalism, the endpoint in a process that transcended consumption and made living a function of accouterments.” Tourists shaped self-identities by visiting places that offered social affirmation. Nowhere was this truer than in the world of wine tourism. As other scholars have noted, “tourism is fundamentally about the difference of place.” Significantly, if perhaps implicitly, Nappers recognized that fine wine – a product of its terroir – was one of the few global commodities associated with specific places. They promoted their wine and their region in equal measure, projecting the sensuous imagery that began to dominate travel guides and food books in the post-war era. Organized tourism became a regular part of winery operations.

With changing consumption patterns and greater national affluence, U.S. sales of dry table wines rose steadily and finally surpassed those of fortified dessert wines in 1967. Napa vintners helped lead this decades-long transition. To compete with larger vineyards in California’s Central Valley, however, they increasingly sought a more lucrative niche in super- and ultra-premium wines. This paper will explore the increasingly centrality of the Napa Valley Wine Auction in the promotion and securing of this marketing position. Although recently surpassed in size and in total bids by a Florida-based auction, Napa Valley’s annual event remains an important phenomenon in its singular dedication to the wines of one region. The auction embodies a measurably successful marketing strategy whose origins can be traced to the simple lunchtime gatherings of seven local vignerons who in the 1940s met to discuss ways to enhance production, to generate new consumption patterns, and to commit to quality vintages even in the face of a more profitable market for bulk wines. Begun in 1980 as the regional industry stood on the precipice of a viticultural boom, the auction has grown over time to reflect the industry’s success. In the end, the auction offers buyers a piece – albeit an expensive piece - of Napa Valley inside a wine bottle. Even as wine tourism reshaped the valley’s landscape, the auction allowed attendees to bid on and possess Napa’s natural quintessence in a liquid form.