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## La Paulée de New York 2011: Choose your weapon

It is the must-visit event of the year for serious collectors of top Burgundy: a three-day bacchanalia where attendees vie to see who can provide the rarest, most exquisite bottles from their favorite region. Alice Feiring goes behind the scenes at La Paulée de New York 2011

There's a costly wine dinner for any need, but the biggest and most coveted one in the USA is run by Daniel Johnnes. This is La Paulée USA, which I attended in New York earlier this year. In the midst of organized chaos, a power sommelier nexus huddled, passing a glass from one nose to the other, debating whether a Jéroboam of 1949 La Tâche was off. Corked? It was a tough call.

The weapons of choice inside the so-called War Room were nose, palate, and corkscrew. It was there, at the Metropolitan Pavilion in New York City on a Saturday night in February, that America's top sommeliers were gathered. They were working pro bono, cork pulling and decanting pricey wines brought by 350 wine-obsessed paying guests. At \$1,400 a plate, plus multiple bottles of wine, Johnnes's La Paulée is the country's most extravagant BYOB, which here means "bring your old Burgundy."

Over a decade ago, when Johnnes cooked up his La Paulée idea, he was wine director of the now-defunct Tribeca restaurant Montrachet. Having been to the original eight-hour La Paulée de Meursault in Burgundy—the end-of-vintage celebration for winemakers, their friends, and clients—he was inspired to transform the idea for Americans. Johnnes's edition refashioned the lunch into a showplace for some of the best Burgundy producers, some of whom he imported at that time. "I lost a lot of money," Johnnes admits, but he went on to build reputations, as well as his brand. The event has blossomed into a three-day midwinter bacchanalia, with plenty of sponsors and many volunteers. La Paulée USA alternates between New York City and San Francisco and has expanded to an occasional Aspen. Next year, it will go to Hong Kong. Ancillary events on the weekend range from \$150 for a seminar,



All photography © Kent Hanson, courtesy of La Paulée USA

Les Cadets de Bourgogne, flown in from Burgundy for the occasion, brandish glasses and sport tastevis as they prepare to sing to the assembled guests

to \$3,750 for the Collector's Dinner (35 people; sold out.) Even when seats went begging in 2009, the event was in the black.

### Buzzing with Burgundy

During La Paulée week, New York City buzzes Burgundy, and wine shops see a bump in the usually slow month of February. Crush Wine & Spirits, for example, emailed an offer of 180 bottles of old Burgundy worth \$60,000 and sold out in a week. But in general, the most ardent collectors need bottles beyond that mailing. Top Burgundy is scarce. To feather wine shelves with exactly the right domaines and vineyards, collectors need the right hookups. That's why La Paulée has become a three-day club, with secret handshakes—usually in the form of rare, large-format bottles of old wine.

Where else can you connect to insider Burgundy like this? Well, there are Becky Wasserman's Burgundy wine boot camps (held in Bouilland, France), which give instant Burgundy intimacy and can cost more than \$10,000 to attend—though if you have that kind of money, they are well worth it, whether you're a new or an experienced collector. Another way in is to squirm

into the good graces of Grand Cru Consulting. Sommelier Robert Bohr is a founding partner of Grand Cru (and a sponsor of La Paulée), which grooms some of the country's best cellars. Many of the owners of those cellars were, in fact, seated together at La Paulée at the table named Musigny. One Grand Cru client toted a Jéroboam of Domaine Mauffre-Truchot 1971 Charmes-Chambertin (\$3,872); while not the most expensive wine of the night, it shone brightly for its esoteric appeal, as well as for its physical beauty. But standing in the middle of the War Room, Bohr explained, "There's stuff around here as prosaic as Rousseau 1993 Clos de Bèze." That "prosaic" wine had been a \$1,149.99 purchase from Crush wine. Bohr wasn't the only one protesting that the event wasn't all about flash. "It's about sharing," he told me. "I would hate for people to think it is about showing off."

### One-upmanship

Nevertheless, the mine-is-bigger-than-yours atmosphere is unavoidable. Bringing the wrong bottle or vintage could be as embarrassing as bringing the wrong date. Mere mortals, not advised by Bohr, who have to choose

vinous arm candy on their own can experience Xanax-inducing anxiety, especially if their cellars don't run deep and old. Michael Dorf donated his City Winery for some of the seminars. His smart date was an esoteric Champagne: 1995 Salon. "This crowd only knows Dom Pérignon or Krug, so it went over big," he said.

Yet, serious Burgundy lovers often feel personal stakes are higher. Daniel Flagstad, co-CEO at Chicago's Kingsbridge Holding, is one of those. "I brought a case of wine with me. The Leroy '59 Grands Echézeaux and DRC '90 Romanée-St-Vivant made it to the dinner." He said, as an industry outsider, he felt it was important to be a giver. "I want to be invited back," he said, even though all he needs to do to come back is make his payment early.

While the evening started with Rolling Stones music over the PA, the bulk of the entertainment came from the campy and paunchy Les Cadets de Bourgogne (flown in from Burgundy), treating the besotted to French drinking songs and leading the suited-up attendees in a French form of the chicken dance, with hands twisting in the air and a lot of *la, la, la, la, lahs*. It plays better than it sounds.



Ambitious food, prepared by some of America's top chefs, is served during the weekend, and workshops showcase some of Burgundy's most recherché wines

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La Paulée USA's mastermind Daniel Johannes applauds Daniel Boulud, who led a brigade of several Michelin-starred chefs from around the world

Decorum flew out the window after the first course. Fast-moving bottles provoked serious decisions: If one has only three glasses, even sublime wines must hit the dump bucket, prompting comparisons to *Sophie's Choice*. Past midnight, when the stinky Epoisses was served, the scene on the floor was mayhem; the party went vertical, and the scavenging for unattended bottles accelerated. Among rarities were barely touched but perfectly swoon-worthy bottles, like the 2004 Gevrey-Chambertins provided by Jean-Marie Fourrier: just too immature. Fourrier had flown in to show his wines. One of his devoted collectors, in from Vancouver, passed him a sip, whispering, "1969 Romanée!"

The wine was profound. The winemaker reflected, "In the morning I will have two thoughts. One: There was so much waste. Two: Where else could I taste these wines? They don't exist in France anymore."

Like a glacier melting under climate change, old wine is an endangered species in France. Most has been spirited out by well-heeled collectors, and now with China's wine thirst, the depletions will accelerate. Once these sips are gone, the tastes will be memories. The evening's most sentimental story came from one of Bohr's clients, who last year at auction purchased a Domaine Faiveley 1928 Volnay Clos de Chêne. The collector said, "Erwan Faiveley, managing

director of his family's domaine, was studying at Columbia. When I saw the Clos de Chêne, I knew I had to buy it to drink with him."

At the evening close, the collector sent the bottle over to Erwan, who in turn shared it with fellow winemaker Frédéric Lafarge. Erwan said, "My great-great-grandfather made that wine. I know I will never have this again. It doesn't exist anymore." After the two men tasted it, Lafarge handed Pascaline Lepeltier, sommelier of Rouge Tomate and a first-time volunteer, the last brown drop. "It was just gorgeous," she said.

*The next Paulée USA will be in San Francisco, February 24-25, 2012. See [www.lapaulee.com](http://www.lapaulee.com)*