

Carneros Wine Alliance hosts first wine tasting and cornhole tournament

Tony Poer Aug 25, 2017



A canine enthusiast inspects the cornhole set up at the first Carneros Wine Alliance tasting and tournament.

Submitted photo



They call it “The Championship of Bags,” and ESPN was there. Sort of.

In July, players of all skill levels gathered in North Carolina for the American Cornhole League’s championship tournament. Before you ask, yes, there is an American Cornhole League. Their main event caught the attention of ESPN3, the go-to channel for competitive video gaming, ultimate frisbee, and hot dog eating contests.

Televised cornhole has yet to arrive in Napa, but on a recent Saturday afternoon a more discreet tournament took place. The scene was Carneros, Napa Valley’s southernmost region originally known for its sheep, then its wines — and now, for flying beanbags.

Organized by The Carneros Wine Alliance (CWA), a marketing group focused on promoting the Carneros AVA, the event at Liana Estates on Las Amigas Road doubled as a fundraiser for the Carneros and Schell-Vista fire departments. Like most Napa Valley fundraisers, wine and food were abundant. But the latter-day version of lawn darts was a new feature.

The idea was born at Liana, where associate brand manager Emily Byrne heard stories of past CWA barbecues and other social events. In early 2017, her veteran colleague, Ann

Marie Howle, proposed a day of fun and games at the hillside property. The Liana-branded cornhole sets lying around the tasting room inspired Byrne to run with it.

“I thought we needed to have this resurgence of community spirit,” she said over the phone last week. “The whole CWA board was very receptive to it, and when we sent out the initial thoughts to all of the members, everyone got very excited. So I knew the tournament was going to go over well.”

Just how well was anyone’s guess. But with a sunny August weather forecast, a host of excellent wineries, and a couple of volunteer fire companies as happy beneficiaries, the only issue was the strong Carneros breeze blowing up from San Pablo Bay. Even in the calmest conditions, tossing a beanbag through a six-inch hole 30 feet away isn’t easy.

Truchard Vineyards’ Matt Fitch spent all afternoon pouring chardonnay and pinot noir. The hospitality director had Truchard’s signature Carneros wines available to sooth the competitive nerves of the couples and groups of friends who broke off into cornhole teams.

“I brought a case of chardonnay and a case of pinot. I think I poured through both,” he said. “I basically poured for two hours straight. I didn’t expect that many people to be there.”

According to Byrne, more than 50 Liana wine club members showed up, joined by others who found out about the fundraiser through word-of-mouth. She greeted everyone with glasses of Carneros sparkling wine before directing them to Liana’s Bayview Barn, an adjacent structure that she and her hospitality team use for private lunches, dinners, and more physically demanding activities like yoga classes. And cornhole.

Inside and out, the barn was arranged with opposing cornhole planks, upon which the names of the participating CWA wineries—Bouchaine, Cuvaision, Etude, Hyde, Schug, and Truchard—were emblazoned.

To acknowledge the CWA’s good will, the Carneros Volunteer Fire Department sent three of its firemen to attend. Andrew Lerma, Alex Johnson, and their captain, Austin Simpson, even formed their own cornhole team. Decorum, along with a genuine concern for public safety, likely prevented them from destroying their competition.

After arriving, they drove their shiny, red engine over to the barn, causing the winery sous-chef, Savannah Duchala, a moment of panic. “I didn’t know this was for the fire department,” the recent CIA Greystone graduate confessed, while keeping an eye on her hot grill. “That is amazing. It actually scared me because the firemen came right up to me while I was cooking, and I said, ‘Oh my god, I’m trouble!’”

Short of catching the Bayview Barn on fire, Duchala was safe from any rebuke. Captain Simpson and his colleagues enjoyed her grilled sliders and kabobs, and they expressed gratitude.

“We’re all volunteers, not employees,” he said. “We don’t get paid for what we do. We just do our jobs and get to give back to the community. That’s what we get out of it.”

As for the money raised that afternoon, Simpson explained that his department is working on funding a new fire station where they can house equipment and create a sleeper program for volunteers.

“Right now, we respond at home, so we’d like to make our response times better for this community. By building a new station, we’ll be able to get to calls a lot faster.”

Because of the semi-official nature of the firemen’s visit, none partook of the CWA’s hospitality beyond the food offered. Emily Byrne and her fellow CWA board members, Carla Bosco and Crista Johnson, weaved through the event as attendees sipped from GoVino cups. Being an afternoon in Carneros, pinot noir was the wine of the moment.

With such established growers as Etude, Hyde Vineyards, and Truchard pouring their wines, the event reflected the CWA’s larger mission of promoting Carneros pinot noir as a counterpoint to Napa Valley’s cabernet-centric identity.

“We were kind of groundbreakers back in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s,” said the industry veteran and CWA chairperson Bosco over the phone. “Nobody really thought pinot noir was even going to do well in Carneros, so there was a fair amount of risk by the [growers].”

“Now, we’re basically seeing the payoff, because pinot noir’s popularity is kind of catching up to what we all intrinsically knew: that it would grow well and develop sterling wines in our region.”

Among the dozens of pinot-sipping cornholers, few were more enthusiastic than Greenville, Ohio native Gene Keesy. “I have a home there,” the fedora-wearing Midwesterner explained, “but I spend a lot of time right here in Napa. Because the sun shines, and they’ve got good wine, and they’ve got nice places like this to come play a little cornhole and drink some wine and eat some snacks.”

Asked how he and his companion, Gay Hirahara, fared in the competition, he sighed. “Well, we won, but the other team had a higher score. It was a moral victory.”

The actual victors of the CWA’s first — and probably not last — cornhole tournament were Kathy and Rick Moreno. They’re Liana club members from Marin County and, unbeknownst to other players that day, are a couple of cornhole ringers. But their first-place finish at Carneros’ own championship of bags was almost incidental.

“The food was so good,” Kathy Moreno said, “and everybody, all the people that were there representing the wineries, were so nice. It was a great way to meet people in the industry and also, you know, people like us who came to participate. We thought it was a great event.”