

## Powerhouse Fare for High-Powered Bidders

By GLENN COLLINS | June 25, 2012

BEFORE an auction of rare Italian masterworks by Fra Bartolommeo and Simone Martini, Sotheby's rolled out some rarefied Italian treats, including imported guanciale in vinaigrette. For an offering of Japanese contemporary art, potential bidders were plied with freshly sliced sushi. And for a preview before the sale of "The Scream" by Edvard Munch, who grew up in Oslo, there was a lavish smorgasbord of Norwegian specialties.



any more — it has to be world-class food," said Lydia Fenet, a Christie's senior vice president and high-profile auctioneer. "People want what is new and different. And it is competitive, and intense."

Christie's spent more than \$1 million on food

and wine in New York last year, up more than 20 percent since 2009; during that time, the number of catered events there rose 35 percent, to more than 400, according to people with knowledge of the auction house.

"I was on the Internet for two hours looking for reindeer meat," said Peter Marrello, the auction house's executive chef.

Luxurious trappings have always filled two of the world's largest auction houses, Christie's and Sotheby's. But until recently, food and drink were considered at best an afterthought, and at worst a messy menace to the often-fragile artifacts in the exhibition rooms.

Now, they are increasingly an obsession: a lure to bidders and a lubricant for bids. In New York, both houses have their own kitchens and in-house caterers; Sotheby's deemed its food important enough to give Mr. Marrello, 48, the title of executive chef. To cook for special occasions, Christie's has imported celebrated chefs including Thomas Keller, Mario Batali, Marcus Samuelsson and Geoffrey Zakarian, while Sotheby's has invited Daniel Boulud and Nobu Matsuhisa.

"You can't have a bowl of nuts on the table

Sotheby's officials said their expenditures were roughly comparable, though they declined to separate food and drink spending from marketing costs. Attendance at the house's 300 catered events in 2011 was up 20 percent over the previous year.

"Our clients are more knowledgeable and passionate about food, and now you have to do something that no one else can do," said Lisa Dennison, the chairwoman of Sotheby's North and South America, adding that she is so obsessed with food herself that she regularly blogs on the company's Web site about hot new restaurants as well as art.

Cuisine is an increasingly vital component of marketing in this secretive world because "food and drink make an auction into an event and not just a sale," said Arlan Ettinger, president of Guernsey's auction house in Manhattan. And the traditional buyer's commission of more than 10

**GREAT  
PERFORMANCES**<sup>®</sup>  
*Celebrate Food.*<sup>™</sup>

# The New York Times

percent to the auction houses can support a high level of fare.

The new excitement about food has been driven, auction executives say, by a number of forces: the slow uptick in the economy, the continued strength of the luxury market, the increasing globalization of bidders and the trend toward buying trophies like art and jewelry as investments. Meanwhile, there is “a constant evolution in the sophistication” of clients’ palates, said Erin McAndrew, a Christie’s vice president.

One collector said what auction houses would not. “Food and wine put you in the mood to buy,” said Joseph Rescigno, an opera conductor and devoted wine collector. “How much you buy can depend on how much you drink,” he said with a laugh, adding that he had attended so many wine auctions that “I should get a frequent-drinker discount.”

At Christie’s recent Green Auction for nonprofit environmental groups, Ms. Fenet was well on her way to coaxing \$600,000 in bids from a crowd of 350. “Look now,” she said, teasing a shy audience. “If you need a drink, why, you can just run back to the bar, and nobody will hold it against you.”

Indeed, the organic 2010 reduced-sulfite Frey sauvignon blanc was flowing freely. The foie gras crostini provided by the restaurant Rouge Tomate were fast disappearing. Moments later, Ms. Fenet lowered the hammer, selling a weekend scuba-diving jaunt for \$14,000.

That is not to suggest that a square of salmon tartare on ciabatta, or a sip of Bordeaux, catapulted the April jewelry sales at Christie’s to \$70.7 million. But “food is paramount because you want to know that the auction house has made a commitment,” said Mark Schwarz, a securities lawyer, as he attended a recent auction there. “It speaks to the importance of the event.”

Food and drink are served most often at preview parties or dinners to drum up interest, rather than at the auctions themselves. Just a few years ago, the standard offerings were those same old



hors d'oeuvres hauled out at most garden-variety receptions and cocktail mixers.

That no longer suffices. “When the food is extremely sparse, people resent that — and loudly complain,” said Ken Rosen, a real estate lawyer who was sampling the fare at a Christie’s auction on a recent evening.

In the old days, auction houses would hold a one-size-fits-all bash for collectors at all levels, “so we’d have 700 people at the party before our Impressionist sale,” said Michael Moore, director of special events at Sotheby’s North America.

But now, busy auction weeks are a whirl of precisely targeted breakfasts, lunches, brunches, afternoon teas, cocktail receptions and seated dinners for anywhere from 10 to 300 potential bidders — not to mention the charity receptions, “where 1,500 people come through,” said Mary

**GREAT  
PERFORMANCES**<sup>®</sup>  
*Celebrate Food.*<sup>™</sup>

# The New York Times

Giuliani, whose events company has been Christie's in-house caterer for two years.

Ms. Fenet said the smaller meals were part of a "more bespoke" approach. "Our clients can enjoy the company of like-minded collectors," she said, "since a small dinner is infinitely more powerful for quality time."

For auction houses and bidders, the intimate dinner is as good as it gets.

Charles Thomas Curtis, a Christie's Americas vice president who heads wine sales, trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris and once cooked at the Crillon Hotel there. He enjoys preparing private preview dinners for gatherings of 12 to 16 clients. "I do the menu and all the cooking, and then we talk about wines and food," he said. "It's a lovely way to spend an evening."

The proximity of soon-to-be-auctioned art, which is often displayed on the dining room walls, can be powerfully affecting. "The food here is excellent," said Leonard Lauder, a chairman of the Alzheimer's Drug Discovery Foundation auction held at Sotheby's. "But don't you think the presence of the art on these walls enhances the food greatly?"

The two auction houses would not reveal their food spending for the average customer, but people with knowledge of the houses' catering operations said a sit-down dinner could cost \$100 to \$200 a person, as well as \$15 to \$30 for alcoholic beverages; catered buffets cost \$50 to \$75 a person for lunch, and \$75 to \$100 for dinner.

At peak times, Ms. Giuliani has catered 10 to 15 events a day using a flexible staff of 60 to 70 employees on call. "You can't repeat yourself, because a lot of people come back," she said. So her staff is updating menus with items like Korean beef tacos and mini black-bean burgers with guacamole and salsa.

The catering staff is trained to work with fanatical caution in proximity to auctionable artworks in the dining rooms. "No one wants to be the server who splashed something on the Botero," said Liz

Neumark, chief executive of Great Performances, Sotheby's in-house caterer for eight years.

Though food and drink aren't ordinarily served during auctions, wine sales are the great exception. "Food and wine make it more pleasurable, and help people to stay" during lengthy bidding, said Jamie Ritchie, head of the Sotheby's wine department.

At a recent 654-lot wine auction at Christie's that ran nearly six hours, the 10 a.m. bidders encountered ranks of sliced melon, heaps of croissants, mounds of smoked salmon and pots of marmalade. By noon the buffet table had been reset with trays of sandwiches, including an onion ficelle rich with prime rib, as well as salads and sides like fingerling potatoes with haricots vert and black olives. Bidders washed it all down with Taittinger Cuvée Prestige.

Playfulness is increasingly on the preview menu. For last year's sale of Andy Warhol's "Self-Portrait" for \$38.4 million, servers at Christie's wore Warhol-style wigs. The November auction of "Tomato Head (Green)" by the artist Paul McCarthy, which sold for \$4.6 million, offered tomato treats, including mini grilled-cheese-and-tomato sandwiches. At a February event at Sotheby's to promote the memoir "Ali in Wonderland" by the comedian Ali Wentworth, cocktails were served in Lewis Carroll-inspired teacups, and snacks in Mad Hatter top hats.

Bite size rules. "If it's big and greasy, you can't socialize," said Victoria Wallace, director of operations for Tamsen Z, a jeweler that donated diamond earrings for the Green Auction.

Graydon Carter, editor of Vanity Fair and an owner of the Waverly Inn, was cruising the food at Christie's during a recent auction. He pounced on a four-inch-long black spoon adorned with a glistening dollop of cow's milk ricotta gnudi, ramp pesto and Meyer lemon. He popped it, then nodded. "Good," he said. "Good little food."

**GREAT  
PERFORMANCES®**  
*Celebrate Food.™*