

Having been to Grapes & Apes at Naples Zoo in 2011, we were really excited to buy our tickets last May when we were given the chance to purchase at the discounted price. We're not cheap, don't get me wrong, but we do plan and are happy to support The Rotary Club and all of the good that they do in our community and in other places around the world.

We were pleased about the communications that we received at several points during the months leading up to the event. We received a few emails from time to time to tell us about some of the auction items they would have and merchandise that would be sold at the zoo. They also did a great job telling us about what time to arrive, where to park and what to wear to Grapes & Apes to most enjoy it.

So the big day finally arrived! The weather is perfect, just as we would expect being here in Naples. We wore very comfortable clothing, grabbed our tickets and our checkbook and headed over to the zoo. Last year we missed the Wine IQ program but heard such good things about it that we registered this time around.

It's about 4:40 and we see parking attendants along Goodlette Road as well as excellent signs instructing us where to turn. We see a trolley for those who will arrive later and need to park off-site so they won't have to walk. Once in the lot, attendants are on hand and direct us to park. We are immediately greeted by the friendly Rotarians who impressed us so much a year ago making us feel extremely welcome and appreciated. One of them escorts us to the registration area which is more elaborate than last year. There is a drummer providing entertainment and tents over the tables with gorgeous tropical decorations. Check-in is very efficient and a moment later with patron book, a pen for tasting notes, glass tags and our credentials around our necks we are walking through the gift shop and into the zoo! We present our tickets for admission to the the Wine IQ class, sponsored by AVA Builder. Others are allowed in early this year but won't be allowed outside the pavilion area until G&A starts at 6 PM.

As we exit the building around 4:55, we can tell already that this year is over the top! An attendant meets us immediately to welcome us (third welcome we have received already!) and to escort us toward our wine class. Around the bend the entire area around the large Banyan tree is set up with exhibits for The Rotary Club, major sponsors, automobiles from Germain, Grapes & Apes merchandise and even Wynn's has a wine exhibit

to showcase the fine wines anyone can buy at their market. We can hear the steel drum playing nearby which contributes to the festive air. There are two zoo animal handlers showing off animals and we are torn between taking it all in and going to our Wine IQ class.

Rather than two classes at the same time, we learned they will offer one pre-event class from wine rockstar Ted Hudgens and then numerous classes throughout the evening that do not require a reservation. Ted's first class tonight is about misunderstood wines and we are very anxious to hear about them. Entering the Safari Canyon, we receive our wine glasses and a label sheet with every wine we will taste to be able to easily identify it on the shelves at Wynn's. There will be 400 people here for the class and many volunteers are on hand to assist in pouring wine. Every row in the stands has several "dump" buckets to ensure we don't get too loopy before the main event but there are also many food options this year to help absorb the alcohol and the pourers are well trained to provide only a 1 oz. sample per wine. Ted is fantastic as expected and invites everyone to look in their booklet for the listing of class names and times that will be held throughout the evening. If you want to learn more about wine, this is surely the place to do it! We know more about misunderstood wines and are ready for the main event.

Once we exit out at 6:00, we see on our maps, a fold out of the center of the booklet, that we are in the center and we can choose to head to the right down to the lake or to the left to the forest. There are also display maps set up for easy reference with "YOU ARE HERE" clearly shown. Recent arrivals are getting their glasses at several distribution points. We also receive special plates which will make it very easy to manage food, wine, eating and hand shaking. It appears that there are many more auction items than before and in addition to several displays along the alligators, there will be items to bid on at every one of the wine stations in each area. A Rotarian with an ASK ME sign gives us a hint to head to the lake to get on the boats before the crowds arrive. So we decide to peruse the auction items along the way stopping to enjoy some of the food which is all being passed on trays in the crowd. Very upscale! And also very easy to get food without waiting in any lines! The large grill is cooking lots of meats and a large wine table and beer display captures our attention. Further down the pathway, we see a country musician and more wine.

Every wine station seems to have some food pairing that was specifically planned to please the palate. The servers this year are more knowledgeable about the wines and the vineyards from which they come so every tasting location becomes its own Wine IQ opportunity. Once we reach the lake we enter the queue for the boat cruise which we see is sponsored Seminole Casino. The boat ride is always fun and something we will enjoy no matter how many times we take it. The glass tags the Rotarians gave us at reception make it very easy to reclaim our wine glasses afterward. It's no mystery what this club does- there are numerous popup banners in each area to show us.

It's about 6:30 and we smell some wonderful food nearby so we head to the left to the zebras and South African lions. Seminole Casino has a huge food presentation next to the lake to promote their restaurant. We notice there are quite a number of tables and chairs around this small loop where we can sit and talk with friends and just take a break to enjoy the food, wine and music taking place here. There is a great guitarist singing tropical favorites. I am excited to get an ice cold beer from the domestic tasting display so we relax for a while taking it all in. The animals are beautiful to watch and even more so from our vantage point with fine food and drink! Over the tiki lit bridge on the little island we see some friends who join us for a cheese tasting and pair up with us for the evening. We take a look in the booklet and see the next WINE IQ class has already started at 7 PM but there is another one at 8 PM that we might try to catch. We are aware that the auction items will end at 8:30 PM so we decide to take a walk and to place some bids along the way.

The auction is so exciting because all of the items are so cleverly packaged. This year the items are spread all over the venue instead of being concentrated together in one place but they are easy to find in the patron book and identify the locations on the maps. There are fabulous trips that would be amazing experiences and even opportunities in our own town that are unusual. Every attendant knows their item intimately and with a great display is it easy to place a high bid when we are also reminded of all that Rotary does to help people. For every item we bid on we receive glo necklaces as well as a card telling us the auction number and our bid amount, in case we win, to expedite check out later in the evening. The card also has an identifier that allows us to locate it on the map again later in case we want to check back to up our bid. We have the option to receive text message notifications that will tell us we were outbid! We are so

impressed by all of the little things that make a huge difference at this event.

There are numerous water locations for us to grab a cold bottle, ample trash bins that seems to be constantly emptied and, at every turn, people greeting us and thanking us for being here and making a difference. There appear to be twice as many entertainers this year and many more animal encounters taking place in the crowd which people really love. It's 7:30 in Naples but it really feels like we are in another place.

We reach the central pavilion area and there is quite a crowd around the exhibits under the Banyan tree. I stop at one of the three Grapes & Apes merchandise displays and we decide to purchase a pair of 2012 wine glasses to start our collection as does the other couple. They are good quality and we are given a claim ticket so we can pick them up when we leave at the 2013 ticket sales table at the exit. Being only 7:45 we don't want to carry them around for another 2 hours. Since it is so easy, I also purchase a sweatshirt with the Grapes & Apes and Naples Zoo logos on it to proudly wear around town. Our friends also buy a leather wine tote and grocery bags that she says will really stand out at the store. Now we just have to remember to pick them up when we leave!

It's 8PM so we return to the Safari Canyon where we enjoy another Boost Your Wine IQ class. This one is all about terrior and how grapes at one vineyard can be totally different than one nearby just because of their elevation, orientation toward the sun and minor soil variations. A complicated subject but one we will continue to learn about as our wine knowledge increases. With our heads and glasses swirling, we decide to go to in the direction of the bears and big cats.

The Black Bear Hammock area is new at G&A for 2012. They have really upped the ante over here with performers, exceptional food and drink offerings as well as their most clever auction items. I spend \$60 on a game to pull a plastic gator out of a big tub of water; on the bottom a number reveals the envelope with the item I have won. A \$100 certificate to a local business! Next we encounter Chef Paul making paella in a five foot pan next to the tigers. It's deliciously paired with some Spanish Rioja. We really enjoy the bears and the ferocious Madagascar Fosa! Next we see the Boars, well actually Boar's Head. They are grilling nearby with their high quality Brats, hotdogs and other meats. Like the lakeside, there are

tables and chairs to make sitting down and relaxing very convenient. There is a trio playing bluegrass music which just seems to fit so perfectly with the ambiance of this area of the event. Although this year feels less structured and more like a festival, I am sure there is a lot happening behind the scenes to ensure perfect execution. There is never any trash in sight and I notice several volunteers pulling wagons of water and ice, constantly refreshing the wine, water and beer stations. We hear the lions roaring again and head in their direction.

When we arrive, David Tetzlaff is beginning a keeper talk and we learn things about the lions we never would have discovered. This is an elegant corner of the event with champagne, jazz instrumentalists and the most sophisticated food we have been served. Even though everyone is casually dressed, this feels like the black tie portion of the evening. We enjoy some conversation with other friends before heading over to the Pavilion for the big finale of the evening. It's 9:30 now and we see on the schedule that the Big Cats area and Lagoon Loop both close at this time to start moving people closer to the exit. The entertainers announce that they will be playing their last piece so everyone knows they need to move back in the other direction. On the way we stop by the auction check-out area which is set up to provide expedited payments. I check with an attendant who confirms I won two items so she gives me a card with the numbers and checks me off her list. I hand my AMEX to a cashier and in 2 minutes I have everything I need to continue to go and enjoy the evening.

Over at the Pavilion, the energy level has really risen. It is amazing how this area transforms at night with all of the LED lights, tiki torches and candles on the tables. There is a band with a singer belting out everyone's favorites sponsored by Kurtz Homes. Elegant tables are decorated with tribal cloths and flowers and candles with both sit down and stand up tables all around. There are servers in the crowd passing delicious chocolates and others passing amazing cake and pastry items as well as gourmet cheesecakes and locally made gelato. The music is so much fun and we chat with the Rotarians at their exhibit showcasing all of their projects. My friend is especially interested and is invited to come to one of their lunch meetings as a guest. Sam is a really good salesman and convinces us each to purchase 1,000 PolioPlus inoculations for \$250. In thanks, he gives us enamel PolioPlus pins, certificates and flashing buttons to wear that boast our contribution for saving so many children.

The music continues and everyone is having a wonderful time. The ambiance is so marvelous and at 9:45 PM the band announces that in 15 minutes, Grapes & Apes will end for another year. There is an audible moan from the still large crowd who realizes they have just a short time left to enjoy The Party of the Year.

As we exit, we hand our used glasses to volunteers collecting them inside the gift shop. Once outside, we see tables set up under tents and we purchase four tickets for 2013 so we can bring friends who were out of town this year then pick up the merchandise and auction items we won, happy to support The Rotary Club of Naples and having had a terrific time. We are heartily thanked as we walk out by numerous Rotarians who escort us toward our car and make us feel like we are royalty.