

The Best Wines Go Toward Education

The Wooden Floor will host its annual Keep the Promise Benefit to help youths get to college



Students perform during The Wooden Floor's 29th Annual Concert at the Irvine Barclay Theatre in 2012. (Kevin P. Casey)

By Heather Youmans, Special to the Daily Pilot
September 20, 2012

Wine lovers will help underserved youth get to college during the Wooden Floor's sixth annual Keep the Promise wine tasting benefit. Proceeds will go to the Santa Ana-based after-school program, which provides arts and educational programs to 375 low-income youth annually.

Community support enables year-round academic programs, pre-collegiate mentoring, college scholarships and family services to be offered free of charge.

Former Wooden Floor board member John Markley and his wife, Janice, created Keep the Promise to host the most distinguished wine tasting in Orange County, and in turn, generate the most impact for the students.

"Generally, they [attendees] come away from the event with a real, clear understanding of what the Wooden Floor is trying to accomplish with the students," Executive Director and Co-Chief Executive Dawn Reese said in a phone interview. "And, for us it's a great opportunity to get the word out about the great work we are doing in arts education and family services with our youth."

The past two wine tastings sold out. And last year, 300 attendees raised \$150,000 for the students. This year's fundraising goal is \$200,000, John Markley said.

"I think we're going to make it," he said. "It seems to be growing in popularity and it's fun. And, as people have learned more about the Wooden Floor, they really have taken an interest in the concept."

During the event, attendees will taste six reds and six whites. The evening will feature a blind taste test competition, opportunity drawings, a silent auction and hor d'orves paired with some of the wines.

Artistic Director and Co-Chief Executive Melanie Ríos Glaser, Reese, board Chairman Ernesto Vasquez and John Markley will present.

Dan Kosta of Kosta Browne Winery will attend, along with six other wine owners, John Markley said.

In preparation for the event, John Markley scoured the globe to find the best wines — most of which are coming from California and Oregon. All wines were hand selected — sometimes years in advance — and rated at least 95 points by the Wine Advocate, Wine Spectator, Burghound or Stephen Tanzer.

"He's been working with master sommelier Steven Poe," Reese said. "He's one of only 194 sommeliers worldwide. And, John — on his own — is really collecting all of the wines, as well."

The event's two headlining wines are the 2009 Kosta Browne pinot noir from Sonoma Coast — Wine Spectator's No. 1 rated Wine of the Year for 2011 — and the 2006 Kistler chardonnay from Kistler Vineyard.

"The fun is just exploring different wine that maybe people would never try on their own," John Markley said. "So, I'm trying to do something different every year. The most favorite thing for people is the pinot noirs and the chardonnays."

In addition to being introduced to top wines, attendees will learn more about the 29-year-old Wooden Floor's mission and accomplishments, as well as the youth they are helping support.

"The goal is to really showcase the students' success at the Wooden Floor and to have it really center around the mission," Reese said. "So, students are in attendance, they are greeting guests, they are part of the fabric of the event."

According to Reese, one or two students will talk about their stories, experiences at the Wooden Floor, as well as their future dreams and goals.

"Since 2005, we've had 100% of our students graduate high school on time and immediately enroll in colleges around the country," Reese said. "Right now, we're looking at students in UCs, the Cal State System schools, as well as major, nationwide universities like Cornell, Wellesley, NYU and Southern Methodist."

The Wooden Floor has 132 students in college, 80 of whom receive a form of financial support from the organization, officials said. Students are studying a variety of fields such as business, education, law, the arts and sciences, Reese said.

"When you look at what these students go through and what their lives are like, when you go see them and talk to them, they are some of the happiest people in the whole world," John Markley said. "They listen well, they're focused. They want to succeed and then you look at the track record and I can't believe it."