

Treading out the Vintage: the impact of the wine industry on post-war Australia

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In 1998 James Halliday floated the idea of doing an oral history of wine in Australia. Within a short time funds were provided through the Wolf Blass Foundation and the Yalumba Wine Co to do a pilot project under the auspices of the National Wine Centre. This was to be a trial that culminated in 179 interviews being deposited in the SLISA covering every wine region with a diversity of people from all aspects of the Australian industry.

The first stage began in 2000 with some of the most senior figures in the industry being interviewed. The trial project gave a rich account of the formation of the modern Australian wine industry. Interviewees included people like Margaret and Peter Lehmann, Wolf Blass, Wytt Moro, Colin Gramp, Tom Cullity, Bill Pannell and Ray Beckwith and covered NSW, SA and WA wine regions. The stories revealed an energetic move to direct Australians perception of wine away from the 'four penny dark' fortified wine to a more sophisticated wine style that was accompanied by good food.

This push towards table wine began in the 1930s but there was a lot against the movement – the Depression, the forces of prohibition and temperance and a high demand for fortified wines such as port and sherry. The move towards table wine grew in the 1950s though, and was assisted by a number of factors: the quality of winemaking courses, particularly at Roseworthy College; the impact of the Second World War; the impact of European migrants; technical advances; the rise of more consumer oriented marketing; and the creative drive of some young winemakers.

In the early 1950s, Colin Gramp, who had seen the world during the Second World War and had been inspired by the Californian industry and news of new German technology, began production of the first cold and pressure fermented white wines. His Orlando Barossa Riesling, and the work done at Yalumba with similar equipment by Rudi Kronberger, changed the face of table wine production.

It was Colin Gramp's belief that *Perlwein* would appeal to a young generation of Australians. His employment of a young German winemaker, Gunter Prass, altered forever Australian wine. Orlando, where Colin and Gunter worked, created *Barossa Pearl*. The wine was launched to coincide with the aftermath of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. It quickly became a sensation and sold more wine than critics and commentators had thought possible. The very shape of the bottle and the label, designed by Wytt Morro, were a huge departure from previous practice.

Colin Gramp describes its creation: [*taken from interview 1, OH692/48 Colin Gramp*]

The Barossa Pearl, which we haven't talked about yet, came on the market to be launched in the 1956 -

CG: 1956, yes.

- with the Olympic Games in Melbourne. Is that right?

CG: No. We had hoped to market it at that time but unfortunately we ran into difficulties with the closure. We had hoped to use a natural cork, and then with a screw cap over that to hold it in position, but unfortunately the gas—after filling at a cold temperature to retain the gas, but when the bottle warmed up, unfortunately it was like a leaking car tyre. (*Laughs*) You'd hear the gas—the loss of gas.

Who came up with the idea for Barossa Pearl, Colin?

CG: The idea—when I was in Germany in 1952? and learning to operate these pressure tanks, both *Seitzwerk* and Dr Brunke of *Seitzwerk* advised me that we should consider marketing pearl wine. And with the help of *Seitzwerk* we bought this, as I mentioned earlier, semi automatic sterile bottling plant.

The decision to—as far as a bottle was concerned we felt that we should not have an ordinary sparkling wine bottle because immediately people would compare it with—in those days we were allowed to call it champagne. We wanted to get right away from that. And the bottle that caught my eye, and also had been proven that it could stand pressure, was Perrier.

Oh, the Perrier water -

CG: But what we actually did with that is that we gave it a much longer neck. But that gave us the basic idea.

And of course, the major difference between the making of pearl compared with the Charmat process of sparkling wines, which we were also doing, was that you didn't know—the secondary fermentation, instead of adding sugar—a solution of sugar—for additional fermentation, we added usually Muscatel and another fruity—and Frontignan—as a sweetener, and also for the refermentation process. And by adding a quantity of juice you broke back your alcohol. In the case of sparkling wines, when you added sugar, you may have broken it back a fraction. But then, of course, during the secondary fermentation, the alcohol would build up again. But in the case of using grape juice, you broke the alcohol back considerably. And of course, using grape varieties such as Muscat and Frontignan, you obtained that fruitiness in the wine, and that's why it was so much lower in alcoholic strength.

But, Colin, had you expected the public to accept the taste so readily? It seemed to me, looking back on it, to have brought particularly women drinkers in that hadn't been there before.

CG: Yes, but I was amazed how many young men enjoyed it. Whether they were enjoying it to encourage the women to drink it also, I don't know. (*Laughs*) But it was amazing how it caught on. And I was surprised that the industry gave us two years to consolidate.

Do you mean without -

CG: Without any competition. I think a lot of them were sitting back and thinking that this was a one day wonder. And of course, the first people to move, and I expected that, was Leo Buring with his sparkling Rhinegold.

While Barossa Pearl was quickly followed by new *Perlwein* from a number of other competitors – including Kaiser Stuhl who brought out Wolf Blass to pioneer their product – the next great growth in table wine consumption came from the creation of the 'Bag in a Box', the wine cask. Angoves, at Renmark South Australia, had been a pathfinder with this concept through the creative thought of Tom Angove. Yet, it was the work of two great minds that came up with the cask. The first, Ian Hickinbotham, came from a family whose contribution to Australia through wine has been immeasurable. Unfortunately, Ian's vision was belaboured with technical issues. The second came through work at Wynns which eventually succeeded.

Ian talks of his time at Penfolds and the results of his research and development. (*OH 692/65 Ian Hickinbotham*) At about the same time that Tom Angove was piloting his wine cask idea in 1965, Ian Hickinbotham, then Manager at Penfolds Melbourne office, was forging a related concept in his typically innovative fashion. Ian relates the story of how he was frustrated in the attempt. Ian's idea, unlike Tom's, was to have a tap that released the wine and allowed the bag to collapse. Ian maintains that the original thought

... went back to Kaiser Stuhl. Each of the tanks there were 6,800 gallons [30,940 L] and I had the problem of handling table wine. We were bottling table wine and I couldn't keep tanks full. So I played with the idea of putting plastic bags in these four metre tanks, which was just impossible. If you think it through, where are you going to stand to position this bag. Anyhow we overcame that by another innovation. We used nitrogen gas. And I had a man sit on a stool all day long, doing nothing else but making sure the big balloon in the liner always had some gas in it. That way it ensured that there was no pressure; there were no pressure valves in those days. Otherwise it is a very dangerous operation. You'd explode the whole tank. But when I started at Penfolds I worked on the bag-in-the-box. [I remember writing to] a man named Lucking of Waddington Duval of London, [and asking] him about his very clever valves. [Another] man named Malpas, who had been a First World War pilot ... just developed his own tap. [Actually], I think I, as manager of Penfolds, had developed seventeen taps with Malpas before realising it wasn't my job. Then I handed [the product] over to the technical division. I was horrified when they brought it out in paint tin. All the bad connotations. And of course it

leaked. I do blame the plastic suppliers. Nobody took it seriously. I found this has always been a problem. If you do something that's too new, you can't get taken seriously. Penfolds suddenly withdrew from it.

As it turned out, Wynns caught the scent of this 'bag-in-box' wine, hunted down an American Second World War method of carting and pouring off battery acid by means of a collapsing bag and tap, placed it in a well-designed cardboard container and the wine cask was born.

These two moves – Barossa Pearl and the wine cask – were part of a new Australian industry that changed the habits of drinks from 80% fortified and 20% table wine in 1950 to the complete reverse by the late 1990s. The other great change in the industry was the growth of promotion and personalities. Characters like Len Evans, Wolf Blass, Frank Margan, James Halliday, Dr Max Lake, Peter Lehmann, Roger Blake, and Ray Ward to name a few have given Australians a taste for wine.

Len Evans, perhaps more than any other, popularised wine. This excerpt tells you why. This is Len's version of a story of great wickedness and hilarity at Renmark. Len wrote these stories up, published them and saw Australians smile at wine:

RL: Len, I must check the story that Frank Margan told me, that you and he went to Renmark and got hold of a wonderful cellar there somehow?

LE: Oh, yes.

Has Tom Angove spoken to you since?

LE: That wasn't Tom. It was a fellow called John who worked for Angove who let the cat out of the bag. Frank Margan was with me. We split up the contents.

That's right. He said that, yes.

LE: My only regret was that he was there to have bloody third of it. The photographer had the other third. And that was when we were told casually one day in '65—that was just after the change to decimal currency—that they had a fantastic cellar. We couldn't believe it. I said, 'Why?' And they said, 'Well, Max Sturt was the manager here'. I knew Max Sturt's reputation as a great wine buff. He was running the RSC in Melbourne by this time. So I went down and we went and had a look at it and my eyes just fell in my head. I mean, O'Shea, old Great Westerns, old Mildaras. We said, 'Well, can we come back tonight and talk about them?'

I can remember this bloke standing at the counter of this closed bar with a ledger in front of him, and he said, 'Well, we'll start off with the '51 Mildara. We're happy to sell you any of these wines at cost price

because we want to get rid of them. They're a liability. They don't sell and they're only sold to the Wine and Food Society Renmark'. They, stupidly, wouldn't buy. I mean, why they didn't buy the lot and have done with it, that was their problem. And he said, 'Seventeen cents a bottle. There's three dozen of that'. And we said, 'Yes, we'd like that. That would be wonderful'. And he said, 'The '52 has gone up in price. That's nineteen cents'. And so it went on. And even though they might've had it for twelve years, we still got it at the cost price—the book price. They wanted to get them off their books.

I can remember there was a dozen '52 Wynns Coonawarra Cabernet standing up in a corner. I said, 'How long has that been standing up like that'. And he said, 'Oh, forever'. I said, 'That'll be no good'. He said, 'No, you can have that'. So it went on.

Did you have this type of thing happening all over Australia, Len, where people didn't understand the value of what they had?

LE: Absolutely. I mean, people either thought something was worth a fortune—that grew later as the trends got set in—or they just didn't realise what they had. There were some wonderful bits and pieces turned up at that time. People used to say, 'I've got an Empire Sparkling Hock from Lindemans', which was nothing more than a bubbly Semillon, but from about 1940 something.

I had a famous purchase. One of my most famous purchases was the Lindemans Cawarra Hock—London Cawarra Hock. Now several hundred dozen of this wine had gone, after the war, to Lindemans agents who'd immediately gone broke. So it had been in a cellar—we're talking '62—for seventeen years, and it was returned to Sydney. So it had actually gone to London and back. When they tested it, some of the qualities weren't very good. Some were slightly maderised and some were a bit this and some that. So they sold it on the basis of one and nine pence a bottle. I think something like that. And if any one bottle wasn't satisfactory, it was replaced. I can remember drinking the wine now. It was a glorious wine.

Evans and Margan were told, after the locals realised that the wine had disappeared, that they were to never show their faces in Renmark again or they would be tarred and feathered.

Wolf Blass is a very different character. He could make and promote great wine and used his considerable skills, in the 1960s and 1970s, to change the course of, particularly, red wine production.

Well, Wolf, come 1964 you become the first travelling winemaker in Australia, if you want to put it that way, since Leo Buring I think, from my records, and that would've been, oh, fifty years before—nearly fifty years before. About 1919. What set you off on that path?

WB: Once the contract was expired Kaiser Stuhl would not allow me to make any sparkling wines, pearl wines, or champagne type of wines, for three years. They thought that I would detrimentally affect their business. They gave me a contract and an air ticket to fly out to America because I had already been offered a job at the Institute in California. And I said, 'If they're so bloody anxious to get rid of me, I must be good. *(Laughter)* I think I'll stick around here. I think I'm going to do something'.

And suddenly people came to me, when this all happened—I applied for a couple of big jobs but it wasn't really the package which I wanted. A couple of the smaller wine companies came to me, and said, 'Look, how about you come and do some work for us? But we don't have enough of a job for you for the whole week'. This was \$2.50 an hour they couldn't pay. You can imagine what the industry was like. I started, and from then onwards I had to really prove the pudding. That was the hardest road I think any man had to take on. It was probably my stubbornness. I said that I wanted to prove myself. I said, 'Stuff them! I'm going to get there somehow'.

And then for seven days, with a little Volkswagen, I was cruising around Basedows, Woodleys, Jim Barry's place. Then the Clare Valley co-operative. Tolleys winery. Bleasdale. You name it. You know, I was there for a couple of hours, a day, and a half a day. And it really rattled the wine shows, you know, for these little boys. And Normans. They won their first trophies.

There were a lot of anxious moments in my life because I knew that this wouldn't get me anywhere. But at the same time, with the success coming their way, I was recognised. And I then made my own little parcel of wine in 1966. When I was going to the Grand Finals with the boys from the Barossa Valley, we stopped at Great Western. I went down to Bests and I bought myself a hogshead or two hogsheads of wine and I blended them in my first wine vintage. And I said to my compatriot companies, 'Do you allow me to make a couple of tons of grapes and I can crush them here?' This was all unheard of. They said, 'You're going to do something?'—you get paid \$2.50 and you ask them to use their equipment. I mean, this [their negative ideas] was all bloody unreal. So my first vintage was 250 dozen—three thousand bottles—1966.

Where did you crush that, Wolf?

WB: I think that was crushed in—I think that would've been crushed at Darky Liebich's [Rovalley].

I was just going to say Rovalley.

WB: I think it was Rovalley. Rovalley helped me all the way along because I made them—by then the three year agreement with Kaiser Stuhl was over—I made them Charmane. The Charmane sparkling wine. And that became the number one seller in the State. His daughter's name was Charmane. So he helped me along to '67. And

he bottled the '67—so there was a little bit more. 1500 cartons. And the boys helped me in Langhorne Creek with the grapes. They said, 'Oh, that's alright'. And I struggled along and made my wines. And then Tolley Scott & Tolley made me this offer in 1969 to become the General Manager of winemaking to convert their brandy operation into wine [production]. And I thought, 'Oh, that's a good job. Now I'm safe'. Then in '69 I started, and then of course I made my wines at Tolleys—'69/'70 and '71. And I think this was one of the greatest success stories, that in three years I brought Tolleys to be the most successful red wine exhibitor in Australia. History will never repeat this thing because Tolleys had no equipment, they had no grapes, they had nothing. And everything had to come from innovation. Innovation was the whole thing. But in '72 they knocked on the door, and they said, 'Look, Wolf, are you going to work for us, or do you want to do your own wine?' I was stupid, stupid. I mean, every other winemaker today does it, but because I was first—I did everything first—they didn't want me to carry on with my own little production.

I said to Grace Broad, my secretary (she came from Yalumba, by the way, 'Grace, you just hang on. There's a Board meeting on. Just hang on'. I'd go home for lunch, and I had to make some decisions. I phoned up Darky Liebich. Phoned up Jim Ingolby. I said, 'Look, I've got a pressure job here'. These guys, they're getting a little bit too smart for me. When I went back, I did it [quit] the typical Australian way (*Laughs*)—but then of course they realised that they've overstepped the mark. Because it was during the vintage. So I finished their vintage, I made my wine, and said, 'Now go jump -' With my own \$2,000 overdraft, I said that I'd go on my own.

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

So Wolf, you become really the first independent winemaker, if you like, going around. You've made the TR series famous all over Australia, and those of us who were lucky enough to drink it remember it just as superb red wine.

Did you always love the blending skills?

WB: I didn't have any choice because at the time when I was working for these small wine companies they didn't have any good grape varieties. They only had fortified grape varieties. Grenache, Mataro, Carignan, and all this type of thing. The premium varieties weren't there. So I had to do something extraordinarily different to master and counteract the big boys in order to succeed,. This was my oak maturation, which I started off, where I said, 'No wood. No good'. But of course then the media fall over me and said, 'Blass' wines, they're good when they're young. They're only blended. He's only a blender. He's not a winemaker'. I mean, I went through every bloomin' thing in this world. I was over six feet tall when I started! Have a look at me now. Now I can ride my own horses. (*Laughter*) This is how they've knocked me down over twenty bloody years. So I had to do

something, and my idea was to get women to drink wine. And it had to be soft and smooth.

At the time our red wines were so heavy. They didn't know how to make them. You put a spoon in, it didn't fall. The spoon still stayed in the red wine. And they were selling the wine by telling the retailer, and the retailer told the consumer, you have to put the wine away, you wait for six/seven years and it's alright to drink. And I thought that was lunatic. So this is when this blending came in. The combination of different varieties, combination of different regions to make this wine drinkable, oak maturation to give them this complexity, and drinkability became the key word. And this is why I was probably successful. And I confused all of the judges! Because suddenly they thought that was the greatest thing, you know, since sliced bread was invented. And when I said I confused them, I certainly didn't fool them. In simple terms, they always thought that my wines wouldn't last. And that's where I really fooled them. Because today you can open a bottle twenty-five years old and it's still standing out like nobody's business. When I got into this red wine Langhorne Creek helped me. I loved the area. I didn't like the South East. I still don't like the South East and I stuck with Langhorne Creek and it's become the second biggest grape growing district in Australia. So I must have been right in the first place.

A thing that became very apparent to Rob whilst doing the interviews was the people's hospitality. The warmth of those involved in the industry comes through the interviews as well as their enjoyment of life and wine. Rob had to learn to resist temptation!

After the pilot interviews were completed the National Wine Foundation and the Winemakers Federation agreed to support the completion of the project. In this second phase a broader range of people were interviewed such as cellar hands, restaurateurs, retailers, marketing agents, board directors, wine writers and viticulturalists. It was tight logistically but interviews were conducted in 2001, 2 and 3.

The breadth of the interviews provides a complex picture of the transition from a fortified wine industry to a table wine industry; changing cultural values in the last decades of the 20th century; the impact of post World War II migrants such as the Italians on the production and consumption of wine; the rise of boutique wineries; increasing number of women becoming winemakers; the impact of restaurants and wine appreciation clubs; public education; marketing; the growth of the export market; new technologies such as refrigeration; and the promotion of wine.

The project documents the Australian wine industry through the voices and memories of the interviewees. We can only be grateful for the characters and the stories they left.... Not to mention the wine itself.