The Len Evans Tutorial

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Matthew Hemming, violinist turned wine merchant chez Averys, describes an amazing tasting experience he endured in Australia last year.

Imagine a wine course run by a bevy of the leading, and most respected, names in the (Australian) business featuring a wine list that looks like the result of a thirsty oenophile's trolley dash through a Christie's auction. Mix with an equal quantity of brain-aching and palate-blistering work. Season with luxury accommodation, fantastic food and sweeten with some balmy Australian weather. That's something approaching the Len Evans Tutorial.

Each year Evans accepts 12 scholars to spend 4½ days with him in the Hunter Valley, honing their skills as wine judges. The idea is to train a new generation of judges to sustain the high standard of judging at Australian wine shows. To achieve this the scholars are tutored in the finest wines of the world - about 100 of them each day - in order to gain an understanding of what Evans calls 'absolute quality.'

Since 2004 one of the 12 places has been awarded to a UK student and I was lucky enough to be that student last year. *Decanter* magazine award the UK scholarship to a young person who has been active in the UK trade for at least three years. Prospective scholars apply by writing a short essay - last year's title was 'In the film *Mondovino* Michael Broadbent says he would rather drink poor, terroir-driven wine than a better, standardised wine. Discuss.' The short-listed candidates are then invited to a blind tasting with Steven Spurrier at the magazine's offices.

On arriving in the Hunter there were a few surprises. First of all it was intimidating how well the other students knew each other - as well as knowing the tutors. On reflection it's not surprising. Yes, Australia's an enormous country, but wine is all about sharing, conviviality and drawing people together, so the trade naturally becomes a close knit community. Even more so when you create a force as unified and cohesive as Brand Australia. The big surprise was the competitive element of the Tutorial. No one in the UK had mentioned that everything we did, each wine we tasted, was assessed and marked; that the competition was not only for a place on the course, but to be named the 'Dux' of the '05 Tutorial. Quite an omission...

Wine tasting in the Hunter was very different to what I was used to at home. We were assessing wines, judging them and scoring them out of 20, whilst working in wine sales in the UK tasting was more often about an analysis of aroma and flavour in order to describe - and ultimately sell - wines to customers. Tasting in this new way was refreshing, less about flowery language and fruit salads than the basic 'Is it any good?' I came to the opinion that a quality-based tasting is more useful to everyone anyway - beyond WSET, who worries about wines being 'bright and clear' - unless they aren't - or varying degrees of straw colour? Still, suddenly having to think about awarding scores was a bit of a culture shock.

It was the morning sessions that had us using the 20 point scale most rigorously. The 12 scholars and 7 staff tasted through a flight of 30 blind wines, across a varietal range, then the staff conferred and we all compared scores. A wine at a time each student announced their mark followed by the tutors' consensus. If one of our scores differed significantly from that of the judges, we were called to justify it to everyone. As if this wasn't intimidating enough, the difficulty levels were compounded by the range of the wines. In the Bordeaux blend class, for example, the wines included 2002 Margaret River wines, Supertuscans and 1970 first growths. The corresponding experiences ranged from skin-crawling - learning that a Chardonnay I'd condemned as 'hot, soupy and lacking definition' was from Len Evans' own estate - to ego-flattering - being one of the few scholars to join the judges in rating the **'66 Cheval Blanc** as gold medal standard (over 18.5 points).

Interestingly, during the week everyone's marking became much more unanimous. On day one the scores for the Chardonnay were all over the place, but by the final session, we were much more in tune - although we were constantly warned to avoid playing it safe and giving everything 17. Other notable trends were that, tasted blind, young vintages of **Ornellaia, Sassicaia** and **Solaia** did not fare well, being marked down as unbalanced. Smart young burgundy was also knocked by the students - wines like **de Vogué's '01 Musigny** - but here we were at odds with the professionals. We were told our uncultured palates(!) missed the subtlety of these wines next to the more generous and powerful Oregon and Otago examples.

In the afternoons the tutors give lectures on their specialisms. With James Halliday, Brian Croser, Ian McKenzie, Iain Riggs, Jeffrey Grosset and Gary Steel on the staff, these were excellent sessions.

At each dinner we often drank more than 25 different wines. Again, the quality was extraordinary, relentless even. Almost everything was served blind, and just like during the day we were quizzed on our judgments and played endless games of options. One such game focussed on a single red that followed a flight Australian wine including **Penfolds Bin 7** and **Bin 60A, Hill of Grace 1963** and **Wynns Michael 1955**. The lone red was **La Tâche 2000**, which I don't think anyone got having drunk all those old Aussies. Another game tasked me - the solo pom - to identify an old sparkling red. Needless to say I was overjoyed to get the vintage (1986) bang on - and didn't let on that it was a stab in the dark...

The Dux of the Tutorial, David Bicknell from Oakridge Vineyards in the Yarra, was decided following a blind tasting exam on the final morning. We were given all the **DRC** reds from a single vintage and asked to identify first the vintage, then the individual grand crus. Sam it may have been, but the spittoons were not required for this one.

The Len Evans Tutorial deserves to be far better known in the British trade, and far more UK students should apply. Extremely hard work it is, but it's also immeasurably rewarding. James Halliday was probably correct when he described it as 'the most exclusive wine school in the world', but I prefer the description of one of my fellow students - 'a cross between Big Brother, Australian Princess and the MW exams.' Slightly irreverent perhaps, but it covers all the bases.

The 2005 call for entries was in *Decanter*'s September edition, so keep an eye out from late summer for details of the 2006 Tutorial.

You might be interested to know that Tom Carson, celebrated winemaker at Yering Station in Yarra Valley is a past Dux of the Len Evans Tutorial trial by tasting note.