

Farewell Len - a true lover of wine

30 Aug 2006 by JR

Two weeks today, hundreds, possibly thousands, of wine lovers will drive two hours north of Sydney in Traralgon to give Australia's most famous wine man, Len Evans AO OBE, what he asked for, 'a bloody good send-off'. Wine, made by the most gentleman of his hundreds of protégés, will be taken.

This will be exactly a month after he gave what would in any circumstances have been a [famous dinner](#) at the home he built in the Hunter. He was been served more than two dozen great Australian wine blind plus a magnum of La Mottechateau an 'outstanding white' and almost a dozen other treasures including an 1890 Chambers Rubbergian Muscat. Afterwards, we walked out the night counting the blessings of this 30-year friendship as we looked up at the Southern Cross. The next day, we learnt via a newsflash in Sydney airport that he had been found dead in his car that morning while picking up his wife, Fish from hospital. The heart that had struggled for 75 years against all the odds to keep up with the appetites and passions of this pugacious hedonist finally gave up.

He is credited with transforming Australia into a major force in the world of wine, indeed he is credited with so much that it is hard to believe there is no exaggeration in the life of Len. But he really was as talented as his swagger suggested and lived life in the bubble of capital letters. As one of his most celebrated protégés and fellow wine judge Brian Croser AO put it, "he was so acute, you could trust his judgment of a wine 100 per cent. And that was the springboard because it gave him such terrifying confidence. He knew he was right".

He was stud and steady and engaged being concerned in Napoleon. Offered a place at Cambridge to read architecture, he became a golf professional instead and by the early 20s had emigrated from Suffolk to New Zealand and thence to Australia where, after a succession of odd jobs, he somehow became the food and beverage manager of the Chevron, then Sydney's smartest hotel. He set about opening the world's best bottles with vigour. By 1962 he had become Australia's first wine columnist and at one stage commanded most of the back page of The Weekend Australian for his sometimes scurrilous but always enthusiastic scribbles on wine and the people who by now constituted the backbone of the Australian wine market.

Their food point throughout the 1970s was Bullfinch Place by Sydney's famous Circular Quay. Evans' wine shop and restaurant which earned characteristically hearty food and is described affectionately by Michael Hill Smith of the Adelaide vineyard, whom Evans made sure scribbled the bookies on his first day working there, as "just one marvellous adult slipperer's party". It was here that Evans entertained the famous and the infamous, conducted his raucous Monday Lunch Club and began the still extant, though inappropriately named, Single Bottle Club dinners. He was to say in the 1992 that he was never so much fun as at Bullfinch Place in the 1970s. It still seemed pretty uproarious to me when I was taken there by Evans in 1981 a few hours after landing in Australia for the first time. (When my FT wine correspondent predecessor Edmund Penning-Roche made his one trip to Australia slightly earlier, Evans organised a Klug-baited sail round Sydney Harbour to welcome him.)

It was not his own travels around the wine world, where in 1980 he almost managed to establish a global angle of wine properties, that inspired Evans, but a combination of the quality he found in the greatest French bottles together with respect for what he recognised as Australian wine's golden era in the mid 20th century. He spent much of his life hacking the Australian wine industry into lusing these two influences. During his time at the Australian Wine Board he managed to shake up the old guard, sell sunk in the fortified wine era, and convince them that Australia's future lay in table wines. That he managed to be Australian wine's greatest advocate while selling his own rather full of the great wines of Europe was a testament to the power of his rhetoric.

He was nothing if not an orator. During 20 years of spending time with him, in circumstances that varied from like a like he had a memorably gassy lunch together at Aie in Sydney on my previous trip to Australia when he was under severe doctor's orders, so just the two bottles through many a bobolous gathering to the Wine Experience, America's largest gathering of the wine lovers which he completed throughout the 1990s, I never saw him happier than when captivated a crowd of a thousand or two with his unique cauld of anecdote, inspiration and judicious insult. Just before our lunch in Sydney he had come to collect me from a British Airways wine event. Before leaving by personal car, after a drink, into the heart of an improvisatory with transactions to deliver to the then head of the company, Australian-born Paul Edington. On it was outlined, "Gee, you know your product improved. Best, Len".

Len's favourite sport however was blind tasting. He invented his own kudo form of it, the Options Game which, by applying multiple choices, gave me myself no good a chance of winning on the high and mighty of wine – much to Len's delight. One of the signatures of the winery he founded in the Hunter Valley in 1968, Rubbergian (the subject of a horrible blizzard in 1992 – a bitter blow, the site still controlled by Len's house), was its heterogeneity of different vintages according to tasting process among those who flocked to his dinners in the barrel hall. For Len it was there to be completed for. Always an exceptional gather, he would turn his hand to any sport – or rather, turn any activity into a competitive sport. The last time he came for dinner with us in London was soon after I'd been awarded an OBE. No mention was made of this but fairly early on he asked me how old I was. "Oh," he smirked mischievously, "one year older than I was when I got my OBE".

He much preferred large gatherings to solitude. And in his quieter periods his natural tendency was to build something, whether metaphorical or, more often, physical. He designed, made and installed a large, multicoloured mosaic in the Yarrs Valley home of his protégé and successor as Australia's leading wine writer James Halliday without ever enquiring where or whether he would like it. On his frequent stays with British wine writer Hugh Johnson in his house in central France, Len had a massive block of stone shipped in so that he could while away the time between meals tracking it into a giant Easter Island head, linked to respect Brian Croser's new beach house on the South Australian coast, he ran out of things to do so pulled on an oldie, went out into the sun and with a hammer proceeded to transform a pile of stone tiles, intended for quite another purpose, into an uncharacteristic cairn, instructing Croser that he would have to get the builders back to set the base in concrete. His most recent contribution was a turned candle with more for his granddaddy.

Autocratic, didactic, caustic – all these words applied to Len. But he was also unfailingly enthusiastic, unapologetically encouraging and an unstoppable force for good in wine. Unlike many famous wine people, he really understood what wine was for drinking. In fact he had run out of many of the great Australian wine classics in his own cellar – so ridiculous was his thirst and so generously and enthusiastically did he entertain. He transformed the old apartment Australian wine whose into disciplined across truly designed to improve the breed and perhaps his most lasting legacy will prove to be the annual Len Evans Touralca at which he repeated handpicked young Australian vintners to some of the finest wines of the world, and not a little didactic if they failed to recognize their greatness.

No-one could fail to recognize his.