Vale Max Lake

15 Apr 2009 by Jancis Robinson

First Len Evans, then Max Lake. Australia's Hunter Valley, within easy reach of Sydney, was for many years home to two of Australian wine's strongest characters. We lost Len Evans in August 2006, and Max Lake at his home in Sydney yesterday.

Max Lake was an outspoken surgeon who did not suffer fools at all, and founded Lake's Folly winery way back in 1963. Although it now has nothing to do with the Lake family, Lake's Folly was Australia's first high-profile small winery selling to devotees via a mailing list, and was the highly successful pioneer of both Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay when they were novelties in New South Wales' premier wine region - and much of Australia. His influence on the Australian wine scene has been far-reaching.

He was also a prolific writer and early self-publisher, specialising in the sense of taste, combining what he learnt professionally with what he learnt in the world of wine. His book *Scents and Sensuality* (John Murray 1989) begins 'This is a book about smell and taste, their pleasures and excitements, their attractions and repulsions. It spans food, wine, perfume, intimate odour, emotion, orgasm, and immune response.'

Born in 1924 of an American mother and Australian father, he was brought up in a cosmopolitan Sydney household, not least because his father ran the Australian branch of Metro Goldwyn Mayer. He claims it was when his father exiled him to the bush after a particularly trying bout of naughtiness that he first became aware of the rhythms, and scents, of nature. He was only 16 when he began his medical studies and he published his first paper, on the hypothalamus, when only 18. The fact that he graduated top of his year in clinical surgery did nothing to quieten him down and he enjoyed a 40-year career, eventually specialising in operating on the hand.

By the 1960s he was also writing about wine and his tally of books on wine, food and the senses includes such titles as *Vine & Scalpel* and *The Fragrance of Love.* He was a big noise in the Wine and Food Society of Australia - and further afield. You always knew when Max entered a room.

Very much his own man, he was never caught up in the corporate mainstream of Australian wine, but he was chairman of judges at the Hobart wine show and I had the - pleasure? task? - of judging under his beady eye in the late 1980s when we filmed an episode of Channel 4's *The Wine Programme* in Tasmania. Those with very long memories may remember the contrast between the whiteness of my lab coat and the blackness of my teeth.

Max was always great fun, and achieved far more in his life than 20 more average lives. As James Halliday wrote in his *Wines & History of the Hunter Valley* (McGraw Hill 1979), 'He is one of the few genuinely free, or lateral, thinkers I have ever met, capable of finding the unexpected in the most mundane event and in developing complex theories which seemingly occur to him in the same second as he articulates them.'

Typically, even though an octogenarian, he had his own website www.maxlake.com

Australian wine writer Campbell Mattinson has written a delightful tribute to him at Industry legend Max Lake dies