

## David Lake - the quiet dean

7 Oct 2009 by Linda Murphy

British Master of Wine David Lake, winemaker at Washington state's Columbia Winery from 1979 until his retirement in 2006, and considered the dean of Washington winemakers, died on Monday (5 Oct) following a lengthy illness. He was 66.

Ascentia Wine Estates, which purchased Columbia Winery from Constellation in 2008, confirmed Lake's death. Poor health prompted Lake to retire from winemaking, and while he was intensely private about his situation, it was known that he had heart bypass and back surgery. One of my colleagues, close to Lake and his wife, Connie, told me Lake succumbed to cancer.

He was born in England and began his wine career in 1969, working in the wholesale trade. He earned his MW in 1975, studied winemaking and viticulture at UC Davis, and worked in Oregon's Willamette Valley before joining Columbia Winery (then known as Associated Vintners) as oenologist in 1979; within a year, he was chief winemaker.

Lake is credited with making Washington's first vineyard-designated wines, and being the first to bottle Syrah, Cabernet Franc and Pinot Gris in the state.

In 1981, he released Washington's first vineyard-designated wines, three Cabernet Sauvignons from the Otis, Red Willow and Sagemoor vineyards. In 1986, Lake talked grower Mike Sauer (pictured below on the left with a young, bearded David Lake) into planting Syrah at Red Willow in Yakima Valley, and two years later, Lake bottled Washington's first Syrah. Today, Syrah is as important a grape variety in the state as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

Lake's wines were typically understated and balanced, running counter to the riper, bigger wines that find favour with important US critics. He also made tasty, value-priced, off-dry Rieslings, long before typical American consumers' palates began to embrace the varietal.

I didn't know David Lake well, though I met him many times, and found him delightfully humble – British reserve, perhaps? At our last meeting, in early 2005, I mentioned my first experience tasting his Columbia Winery wines, at a San Francisco event in the late 1990s. There, he presented the David Lake Series of reserve-style wines, whose labels bore his name in large, gaudy script, as if he'd signed them himself with a broad paint brush. Ego at play, I thought at the time.

Yet in 2005, Lake told me he was much chagrined at the marketing department's over-enthusiastic use of his name on that particular set of wines. He'd rather be in the background, he said, letting the wines speak for themselves. He died with a similar mindset – quietly and privately, content to let his life's work speak for itself. I'm told that Lake insisted that no memorial services be held.