

Saluting Patrick Sandeman

29 Sep 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

Master of Wine Nicolas Belfrage, veteran importer of Italian wines into the UK and author of several important books on Italian wine, notes with some exasperation, 'If there was an exciting new Tuscan wine producer, Patrick Sandeman always got there first.'

He did tend to get everywhere first, such was his obsession with speed. As his old friend Beau (Sebastian) Reid puts it, 'He shot, he skied, he was no stranger to adrenalin. In his 50s he continued to enjoy what are widely considered younger men's pursuits. He drove a motorbike (too fast), he sailed (too fast) and he ran (quite fast) taking part in the London Marathon in 2011. He took up skydiving in 1994, and it gave him enormous pleasure. Over the last decade he completed 700 jumps, occasionally bunking off work when the skies were clear and his bike was ready to go.'

Last Saturday looked like a perfect day for skydivers, but under a brilliantly clear sky on a warm late summer's day at Sibson airfield near Peterborough, as reported [here](#), this talented wine merchant, one half of Lea & Sandeman, fatally collided with a French skydiver in his 20s who miraculously survived and is being treated in hospital. He had already jumped at least three times that afternoon, but was determined to make the most of a beautiful day.

Just as, a famously generous host, he would always open one more bottle from his enviable cellar in the Putney home he shared with his wife Katie. He cooked, he washed up the glasses, he loved practical jokes, and his particularly dark Spanish eyes always seemed to be illuminated by a twinkle. He believed in working hard and playing hard but above all in having fun.

He had port and above all sherry flowing through his veins. His father David and his mother Teresa Valdespino were both from prominent Jerezano families, although he was brought up in Sussex and educated at Ampleforth where he shone as a sportsman. He taught there in his gap year and in 1977 went to qualify as a chartered company secretary at City of London Polytechnic. His long-held plan was to join his father, uncle and brother George in the family business but, to his dismay, Sandeman port and sherry was sold in 1979 to the mighty Seagram. Keen to maintain connections with the family, Seagram posted him to various vinous outposts in the early 1980s, including Bordeaux and Oporto but he felt the need to forge his own wine career. (I can't help thinking that if he had stayed in the sherry business, the fortunes of sherry might be very different today.)

By 1986 he and Katie had returned to London and he went to work for Graham Chidgey of Laytons wine merchant who had just bought the Fulham retail operation Les Caves de la Madeleine. With his charm, good looks and clean-cut Chelsea manners, he was an obvious choice to manage this wine shop for Sloanes, but while working for Chidgey he met another young wine merchant, Charles Lea, who had a particular interest in buying distinctive French wine. Thus in 1988 was born Lea & Sandeman, originally a list, a storage unit in Vauxhall and a desk chez Lea in Battersea. Today it is one of Britain's most respected wine merchants, with four smart, well-staffed shops in and around London, a tiny office somehow run with aplomb and good humour by Katie, and a selection of superior wines that are distinguished by the amount of care Messrs Lea, and until now Sandeman who was responsible for territories other than France, have put into sourcing them. Not for them a lazy phone call to a broker. They have eaten up the miles themselves.

At great speed in the case of Sandeman. He told me with a broad smile that his souvenir of the few days he spent driving me around Tuscany a couple of years ago was a clutch of speeding tickets. He was clearly a favourite at each of the addresses we visited.

One of the wine trade's most popular characters, he occupied the historic role of Swan Warden (seen here in his robes) of the Vintners' Company, one of the City of London's oldest livery companies and as such would have made a, doubtless more-than-averagely-amusing, speech in late November welcoming the great and the good of the Company to The Swan Feast. He hosted the Swan Upping day last July when Vintners are supposed to conduct a census of swans on the river. His waistcoat is still discussed. If all went according to plan he would have been Master in three years' time. He was also in the process of revving up the contents of the Vintners' cellar, keenly aware of the competition from some other livery companies. He may have been nice but he certainly wasn't dim. Managing to triumph over the cut-price competition from Britain's supermarkets is sufficient evidence of that.

He was both kind and unusually efficient. Whenever I needed to know something he would answer straight away (he was a great lover of technology, being the first wine merchant I spotted with an iPad) and was extremely kind. He must have remembered, from our Tuscan trip I think, my love of Vin Santo, the characteristic sweet wine of Central Italy, as well as my husband's love of honey. To my surprise a bottle of Poggio Bonelli's 2007 and a jar of Tuscan honey was delivered to our home the day before he died by one of Lea & Sandeman's personable young men. One of my greatest regrets is that I will never have the chance to thank him.

In memory of Patrick, his family have chosen the Southern Spinal Injuries Trust as the most suitable charity to channel donations. They will provide funds for spinally injured people to improve their lives generally and enable them to achieve their dreams. For donations please go [here](#) or

you can donate by post to: Patrick Sandeman, Funding Extraordinary Journeys, c/o Southern Spinal Injuries Trust, 21 Chipper Lane, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP1 1BG. Cheques made payable to SSIT.