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Farewell Len - a true lover of wine



Two weeks today hundreds, possibly thousands, of wine lovers will drive two hours north of Sydney to Tower Estate in the Hunter Valley 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 prominent 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 memorable dinner for us at the home he built in the Hunter. We were been served more than two dozen great Australian wines blind plus a magnum of Le Montrachet as 'quaffing white' and almost a dozen other treasures including an 1890 Chambers Rutherglen Muscat. Afterwards, we reeled out into the night counting the blessings of this 30-year friendship as we blinked up at the Southern Cross. The next day, we learnt via a newflash in Sydney airport that he had been found dead in his car that morning while picking up his wife Trish from hospital. The heart that had struggled for 75 years against all the odds to keep up with the appetites and passions of this pugnacious 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 boldest of capital letters. As one of his most celebrated protégés and fellow wine judges 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 short and stocky and enjoyed being compared to Napoleon. Offered a place at Cambridge to read architecture, he became a golf professional instead and by his 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 beginnings of the Australian wine mafia.

Their focal point throughout the 1970s was Bulletin Place by Sydney's famous Circular Quay, Evans' wine shop and restaurant which served characteristically hearty food and is described affectionately by Michael Hill Smith of the Adelaide vinocracy, whom Evans made sure scrubbed the lavatories on his first day working there, as "just one marvellous adult playpen really". It was here that Evans entertained the famous and the bibulous, conducted his ruinous Monday Lunch Club and began the still extant, though inappropriately named, Single Bottle Club dinners. He was to say in the 1995 that life was never so much fun as at Bulletin 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-Rowsell made his one trip to Australia slightly earlier, Evans organised a Krug-fuelled 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 empire 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 hectoring the Australian wine industry into fusing these two influences. During his time at the Australian Wine Board he managed to shake up the old guard, still 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 stuffing his own cellar full of the great wines of Europe was a testament to the power of his rhetoric.

He was nothing if not an orator. During 30 years of spending time with him, in circumstances that varied from tête à tête (we had a memorably gossipy lunch together at Aria in Sydney on my previous trip to Australia when he was under severe doctor's orders, so just the two bottles) through many a boisterous gathering to the Wine Experience, America's largest gathering of fine wine lovers which he compèred throughout the 1990s, I never saw him happier than when captivating a crowd of a thousand or two with his unique cuvée 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 he pressed one of his cards into the hand of a BA representative with instructions to deliver it to the then head of the company, Australian-born Rod Eddington. On it was scribbled, "Greetings, Rod. Hope your palate's improved. Best, Len."

Len's favourite sport however was blind tasting. He invented his own ludic form of it, the Options Game which, by supplying multiple choices, gave neophytes as good a chance of winning as 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 1969, Rothbury (the subject of a hostile takeover in 1999 – a bitter blow, the site still overlooked by Len's house), was its hierarchy of different ribbons according to tasting prowess among those who flocked to his dinners in the barrel hall. For Len life was there to be competed for. Always an exceptional golfer, 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. "Ah," he smiled 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 Yarra 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 hacking it into a giant Easter Island head. Invited to inspect Brian Croser's new beach house on the South Australian coast, he ran out of things to do so pulled on an oilskin, went out into the rain and with a hammer proceeded to transform a pile of slate tiles, intended for quite another purpose, into an ornamental cairn, instructing Croser that he would have to get the builders back to set the base in concrete. His most recent construction was a turreted castle with moat for his grandchildren.

Autocratic, didactic, caustic – all these words applied to Len. But he was also unfailingly enthusiastic, uproariously entertaining 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 rapacious was his thirst and so generously and enthusiastically did he entertain. He transformed the all-important Australian wine shows into disciplined arenas truly designed to 'improve the breed' and perhaps his most lasting legacy will prove to be the annual Len Evans Tutorials at which he exposed handpicked young Australian tasters to some of the finest wines of the world, and not a little ridicule if they failed to recognise their greatness.

No one could fail to recognise his.