

THE END OF AN ERA IN AUSTRALIA

The sudden death of Len Evans on 17 August 2006 marked the end of an era of unimaginable change in the Australian wine industry. There were numerous catalysts for that change, but none more important than that provided by Evans.

When in 1965 the Australian Wine Board appointed him as its first National Promotions Manager and told that he would be promoting the static, though still dominant sales of fortified wines rather than table wines, his response was, "If that is the case, I'm leaving." Common sense prevailed - and over the next five years red wine sales increased by over 150% to 25.5 million litres.

Evans did in fact leave in 1967, establishing his restaurant and wine shop in Sydney, and putting the pieces in place for what was to become Rothbury Estate. Red wine sales continued to increase, reaching 36 million litres in 1975, the year before white wine overtook red wine sales. Fuelled by the soft pack, cask technology, white wine sales soared from 35 million litres in 1975 to 121 million in 1980. Plantings had underpinned the growth, rising from 56,000 hectares in 1965 to 71,000 hectares in 1975. It was a figure not reached again until 1995: the volume of exports had remained virtually the same from 1960 to 1985 at a paltry 8.6 million litres a year, far less than imports of 13.1 million.

Once exports started to increase in 1986, the initial effect was to absorb the chronic surpluses which had throttled the industry, problems exacerbated by government taxes on wine, which since being first imposed in 1970, ultimately reached today's level of close to 40% of retail value. Cynical politicians have suggested this has helped spur exports, which are, of course, tax free.

A number of parallel developments occurred in the last few years of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. Len Evans - via newspaper columns, magazines and books, but most directly through the wine show system - opened the eyes of Australian winemakers, young and old alike, to the great wines of Europe, and particularly France. First up, senior winemakers went to see for themselves where and how these wines were made, following in the solitary footsteps of Max Schubert in 1950. They came back

and exhorted young makers to undertake the trip, and the tradition of Australian Flying Winemakers began, and continues to this day.

Next, the cool regions of Australia began to proliferate in the 1980s, and, with them, varietal choice expanded dramatically: chardonnay, pinot noir, merlot and cabernet sauvignon joined the traditional base of semillon, riesling, mourvedre, grenache and shiraz. Then came sauvignon blanc, pinot gris plus a surge of Italian and Spanish varieties.

In 1995 Len Evans exhorted the industry to move beyond the five-year forecasts which it had previously promulgated, and to put in place a 30-year plan. Strategy 2025 had "the vision that by 2025 the Australian wine industry will achieve AUD 4.5 billion in annual sales by being the world's most influential and profitable supplier of branded wines". Despite being treated with some derision when first released, the vision became reality 22 years earlier than anticipated when, in 2003, sales reached AUD 4.52 billion (2.7bn Euro, \$3.4bn). The importance of Australia's branded wines is unquestioned, and the average FOB value per litre of its exports exceeded all countries except New Zealand.

But through this period of heady growth, Len Evans was the leader of a chorus which warned against complacency, exhorted winemakers to produce ever-better regional wines, and emphasised the importance of marketing those wines across the world.

Despite this, Australia is currently the victim of its own success. The dazzling rise of Yellowtail has reinforced Australia's image as a reliable producer of cheap sunshine in a bottle. While still clinging to its status as dominant supplier to the United Kingdom and the United States the value per litre has fallen over the past two years, exacerbated by bulk exports. Australia has the physical and human resources to head off rising competition from Old World and New World producers alike, but it will have to be smarter than ever before to do so.

