

More than 12 months ago, we made the decision that this issue of the Wine & Viticulture Journal would be themed around 'the business of wine shows'. Little did we know that the topic would hot up in the ensuing months, beginning with the debate primarily in the Twittersphere and blogosphere surrounding the change from the 20-point to 100-point system by the likes of the Royal Queensland and Sydney Royal wine shows, and the discussion on the state of the wine show system held in the Hunter Valley in September during the inaugural Len Evans Tutorial Reunion. So, our coverage of wine shows appropriately begins with a summary of the aforementioned Hunter Valley discussion. This is followed by the thoughts of three Australian winemakers on the wine show system in this country and their reasons for entering (or not entering) them. We then approached the organisers of five wine shows – a regional, state, capital city, the national and a variety-specific wine show – to share with our readers how their shows have evolved in recent years and to convey their challenges. We then present an overview of the wine show system in other parts of the New World – namely, New Zealand and the US. Armando Corsi, from the Ehrenberg Bass Institute for Marketing Science at the University of South Australia, brings us up to date on the latest research into the role of gongs in driving consumers' wine purchases and the consistency of wine judging across different wine shows.

The show must go on

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Held over a weekend at the beginning of September, the inaugural Len Evans Tutorial Reunion began simply as a catch-up of some of the 132 scholars who have passed through the tutorial, timed to coincide with the birthday of Len Evans. However, in the words of the Paul Kelly song, 'from little things, big things grow...', this seemed like too good an opportunity to have a talkfest regarding the 'state of the nation' with regard to the Australian wine show system.

BACKGROUND

The inaugural Len Evans Tutorial was held in November 2001 in the Hunter Valley. Instigated by Len Evans AO OBE and supported by the industry, the tutorial has played a key part in training aspirant judges. Importantly, the 12 scholars who graduated reflect all parts of the modern Australian industry including retailers, writers, sommeliers and educators, as well as the traditional winemaking judge background.

Many tutorial graduates have gone on to be regular wine show judges, moving quickly up through the ranks to become panel and wine show chairs. They are recognised as being the 'next generation' of wine show judges and have had considerable impact on encouraging a diverse range of wine styles, particularly with regard to Chardonnay and cool climate Shiraz.

Roughly half of the ex-scholars from the tutorial are not from a winemaking background, and contribute a broader understanding of 'style' as opposed to the 'technical' approach of winemakers, as well as having a coal-face appreciation of the needs of the consumer.

Also in 2001, the ASVO convened a

seminar titled 'Who's running this show?' to consider the current and future state of play of the Australian wine show system. Key stakeholders, including wine show exhibitors, judges, wine show committees and retailers made presentations and a round table discussion was held.

As a result of this seminar, a wine show committee was formed under the auspices of the ASVO. Over a period of time, this group developed some key recommendations focussing on improving the integrity of the wine show system and intending to assist wine show committees in administering some benchmarks for the management of their shows. Importantly, the ASVO also established the wine show judge register to record details and history of all current wine judges on the Australian wine show circuit.

However, there were many issues discussed in 2001 that had not been addressed, and it was apparent that the zeitgeist was right for a review of where we were at.

THE REUNION

All of the capital city wine shows were approached for financial support, as well as many of the regional shows.

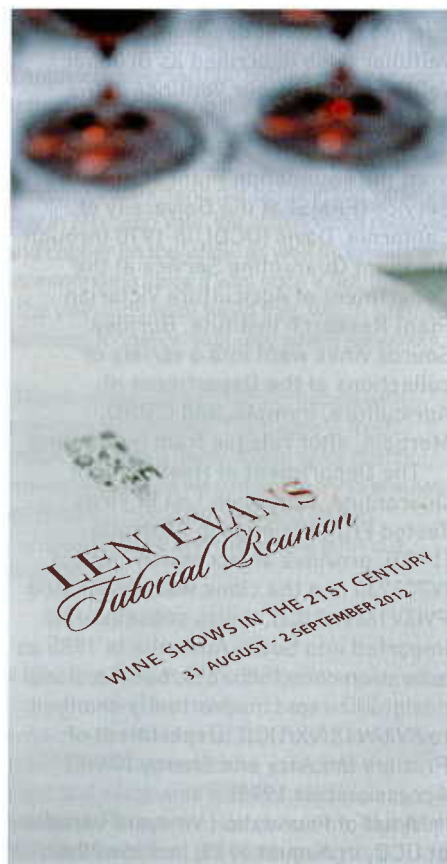


Photo: Kirsten Edwards.



More than 100 people from various sectors of the wine industry gathered for the wine show talkfest, including wine show representatives and many involved in the Australian wine show system or the Len Evans Tutorial.

Sponsorship was also received from Dan Murphy's, as well as support from the ASVO. Len Evans Tutorial (LET) trustee Basil Sellers provided early support to enable the reunion to proceed. Importantly, many of the wine shows also committed to attend, as did many of those who have been involved in the Australian wine show system or the tutorial over the years. With a number of ex-scholars also showing up, more than 100 people committed to the talkfest.

The program for the two days was developed after consultation with the tutors of the Len Evans Tutorial (James Halliday, Ian McKenzie *et al.*) and a group of ex-scholars who are involved at both a regional and national level with wine shows. After that, it was a question of inviting commentators who were considered as having an interest in the particular topics to participate, as well as conveners and moderators who were able to control the discussion!

The key items to discuss fell out pretty easily: the 100-point judging scale being a case in point. Engaging the consumer was also an important topic, and the issue of wine show structure, which was discussed in 2001, was also revisited. All of this discussion was broken up with a couple of tastings: Tom Carson leading the way on how to judge Pinot Noir (or more to the point, how not to judge Pinot) and the irrepressible Stu Knox, from Fix St James, walking into the devil's lair with alternative styles and the 'natural wine' debate.

Happily, we were able to make changes to the program on the fly, which enabled a panel of representatives from various wine show committees to be present on the Sunday morning.

OUTCOMES

It was obvious right from the start (and certainly with more than 100 people in attendance) that people still care hugely about the wine show system and its worth. One of the most gratifying outcomes from the weekend was the passion and commitment with which every person spoke, and the openness of the sometimes heated debate.

Discussion centred on exactly why and for whom wine shows are conducted. Is it for winemakers or for consumers, and are we doing a good job of serving both of these stakeholders? Is the key focus of 'improving the breed' obsolete? What role do regional wine shows serve? And, what about capital city wine shows?

Whilst there was little consensus on the merits of judging out of 100 or 20, with 100 point scores becoming more commonplace, do medals or points out of 100 mean more to the consumer? How does the LET evolve in the future? How can it be future-proofed financially and from a succession point of view?

Some consensus was reached on the need to progress the following issues:

- a system for judge accreditation and remuneration
- using wine show results to better engage the consumer nationally and internationally
- using 'style' or specialist judges for particular classes
- capping wines to be judged to 100 per day
- reviewing the trophy judging process and how this operates
- the use of new technology to better communicate results for consumers and exhibitors e.g. iPads for scoring, a common portal or app for all wine show results

- capital city wine shows taking a leadership role with regard to the regional shows in their states
- reviewing the wine show calendar.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

After a meeting for the first time of representatives of the capital city wine shows on the Sunday morning of the reunion, the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria convened a meeting of representatives of all the capital city shows, which was timed for the end of October, in Melbourne. The proposed agenda included discussion of items such as review and recap of the recommendations from the Len Evans Tutorial session, draft standards of conduct for wine shows, and consumer engagement and communication.

A business proposal and case for involvement has been put to the board of the ASVO advocating using its experience and industry platform to reform a reference group to review and enunciate wine show standards and resurrect the judges register. It was hoped to secure support from the capital city shows of this agenda in October.

Wine Communicators Australia is committed to playing a key role in communicating and maintaining a dialogue in this area through its blogging and webinar platform.

Ex-scholars Jim Chatto and Tom Carson are putting together a proposal for a Len Evans Tutorial alumni association, which will promote the interests of the tutorial, as well as supporting it into the future. Importantly, immediately after the tutorial, a substantial amount of funds over a five-year period were committed by individuals and companies.

SUMMARY

One of the questions asked at the beginning of the weekend with the intention of getting the discussion going was 'Are wine shows obsolete?' It was apparent after two days of debate that the answer is not as simple as yes or no. The wine show system in Australia has played a vital part in elevating both the quality and the promotion of wine for consumers domestically and internationally. Changes do need to be made, but this will take the support of all stakeholders and will require a sustained reform agenda, rather than wholesale overnight change.

The authors thank the people and organisations who helped make the reunion possible.