

CLASS AND A HALF

The Australian wine industry owes much to the late Len Evans. But perhaps his greatest legacy is the annual Pokolbin master class. CAROLYN SWANSON watched in amazement as \$130,000 worth of the world's best wines were uncorked at "the most exclusive wine school in the world".

Even from the stars, the late Len Evans continues to exert his influence over the Australian wine industry. For the Len Evans Tutorial Master Class is nothing short of heaven for the lucky dozen selected to take part.

Now eight years old, the annual tutorial is revered as one of the great weeks in the world of wine.

Many of the world's rarest and oldest wines to be opened in any one year are uncorked during this extraordinary Melbourne Cup week at Pokolbin, held in early November.

"You get to taste wines you will never see again in your lifetime and you get to judge

them under the guidance of wine legends like James Halliday, Ian McKenzie and Iain Riggs. That makes so much difference to your understanding of the wine," former tutorial dux and now a volunteer pourer for the event, Liz Jackson, says.

Not even lemons could have wiped the smiles off the faces of the 12 selected this year from a field of 130 hopefuls to taste their way through \$130,000 worth of the world's best wines over five days of all-expenses-paid expert judging sessions.

Weekender's fly-on-the-wall assignment is to "embed" in the exclusive Pokolbin tutorial and watch this talented mixed dozen navigate

their way through the thrills and spills of picking a \$15,000 bottle of Romanee-Conti from a \$1200 Grands Echezeaux, a 1984 Penfolds Grange from the 2002 vintage, or, on Cup day, the 1999 Bollinger from the 1998 Krug.

The seven women and five men – five winemakers, four sommeliers from top Australian restaurants, two wine sellers and one journalist – are holed up for the week in five-star comfort at Len Evans's Tower Lodge development and at the neighbouring Tempus Two winery.

It is a testing time for the scholars, who need the stamina to taste their way through 273

COURTING PERFECTION

The 2008 Len Evans tutorial dux, Larissa Bray, is a softly spoken Perth winemaker who works two days a week as a lawyer for the legal firm Lawton Gillon and uses her annual leave each year to work on the vintages in France and Italy.

She was the tutorial's dark horse, and it wasn't until the award put the spotlight on the attractive winemaker that Larissa's oenological pedigree became apparent.

"At [Lawton Gillon] they think I'm this crazy woman who comes to work with black hands for a month each year, then disappears off to Europe to stamp grapes," Bray says.

She makes wine at the Aldersyde Estate in the Perth hills, where her maternal grandparents made wine for their own consumption and where her parents started a family winery.

"My mother's family were really caretakers of the land that our vines grow on today. It is a good feeling to know that your grandparents might have been digging or weeding the very patch of earth you're tackling today," she says.

As a five-year-old, she hated having to help pick grapes in the early mornings before she went to school.

But when she completed her law degree and began working as a lawyer, she realised how much she wanted to be part of the wine industry.

She left a full-time law job to work with James Halliday and Len Evans at the short-lived online retailer Winepros in Sydney in 2000, then completed a graduate course in oenology at Adelaide University and went to France to do her first French vintage.

Fluent in both French and Serbian, Bray is also a qualified ski instructor, forklift driver and wine judge. She resigned from a winemaking position at Margaret River's Cape Mentelle last year to take over the family winery and work a vintage with Vietti in Barolo, Italy.

"I have been exceptionally fortunate to have tasted many great wines during my international and domestic vintages," she says.

"But this tutorial has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to speak with and learn from experienced judges as well as my peers.

"These wines are so inspiring. The Romanee-Conti had pedigree without it having to jump out and tell you so. That's the style of wine that I aspire to make. A wine with class and with its own personality.

"For Len to establish a tutorial, to give a platform where some of the most experienced and learned share their knowledge, you can't express enough gratitude."



BEST OF THE BUNCH: Larissa Bray.



bottles of the world's best wine, the noses of bloodhounds, the perspicacity to identify the different vintages, terroirs (soil, climate and aspect in which the grapes are grown) and top notes, the poetic licence to describe the nectar they have tasted, the rhetoric to justify their wine scores, and the memory to recall it all.

Blind tasting sessions begin at 9.30 every morning of 30 varietal wines from up to five countries, and spanning up to 30 years. Master class sessions for particular styles follow a dry lunch, then "options" and other tasting games finish around midnight at the end of a long wet dinner, with the exception of Friday, which ends with a traditional Len Evans long lunch and the much-anticipated announcement of the tutorial dux.

In between tastings, the mixed dozen duck out to Harrigan's Irish Pub down the road or dip into the diminishing slabs of beer, testimony to the strange fact that beer is the preferred palate cleanser for wine tasters, makers and judges.

"The saying is that a good vintage always follows a good beer," confirms tutorial coordinator Christina Pattinson.

"This is not an exercise in excess," tutorial convenor and wine legend in his own right, Iain Riggs, explains.

"The price of the world's best wines is not set by winemakers. It is set by an unmet demand for top-quality wines and it is important that Australian wine professionals can recognise and pitch ourselves against such quality.

"This tutorial presents a rare chance for these young guns to taste many of the world's most iconic wines. How Australia fares over the next few decades will rest mostly on their shoulders, as we try to convince the wine-drinking world that we not only produce the best beverage wine but also have enough iconic sites to produce Australian classics."

At the Tempus Two bunker, the solid clink of Riedel crystal signals a tasting in progress. Riggs, the manager and co-owner of the Hunter's Brokenwood winery, and his fellow Australian wine legends James Halliday, Tim James, Gary Steel and Ian McKenzie are seated at a table keeping an eye on the scholars, who are bent over 12 desks set with 30 glasses of chardonnay on white linen tablecloths, slop buckets at their feet.

Tasting their way along their rows of chardonnay, they ignore no-medal wines (worth 15/20 or less) after a dismissive spit. Potential top golds (worth 19.5/20 or more) and low golds (worth between 18.5 and 19.5/20) are selected for second and third tastings, while silvers (17-18/20) and bronzes (15.5-16.5/20) are inched forward for further examination.

The tasting room must remain aromatically neutral – no perfume, lipstick, aftershave, deodorants or cigarettes. Ignore this ruling

at your peril. The scholars' fine olfactory nerves will shut down, or they will demand an expensive re-run of the wine tasting, as nearly happened at last year's Adelaide Wine Show, when a rigger stopped to light up a cigarette as he strolled past the tasting hall.

The pourers' room down the hall is more relaxed. Evans anecdotes fuel the banter of the nine who hold the coveted jobs. New pourers may well have to wait for a death among the existing pourers to score what is arguably Australia's best volunteering job.

The morning's wines are lined up along a bench, a tasting glass in front of each, so each pourer can sample the exclusive line-up.

Liz Jackson obliges with a quick wine-judging class for *Weekender*. Our top scorer with 18.5 is the 2002 Montrachet Grand Cru – one of the world's best dry whites and a favourite wine, we learn later, of Evans's wife Trish.

"Most wine judges do swallow some, but not all, of the wine they test," Jackson explains as we spit daintily into the slop bucket.

"What I do is pick up a wine glass and swirl it to release some of its aromatics," she demonstrates.

"I have a good look at its colour, then I bring it to the nose. For me, the nose gives away so much. It gives away variety. But the most important thing is the taste, and I think a lot of people forget that wine is to be enjoyed," she says.

"On the palate, I am looking for a chardonnay with structure, a good length, a great balance of acid and fruit layers, then the taste – not too much artefact (chemical additions).

"I take a small sip, I have a tiny swallow, I chew on it as I draw

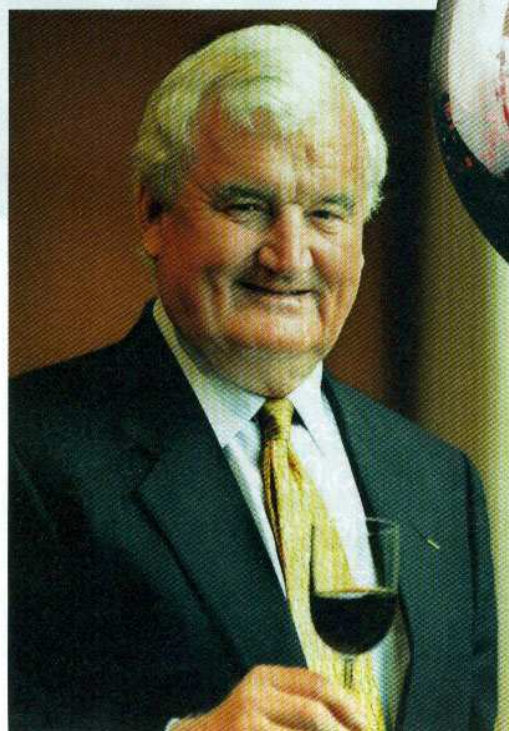
oxygen in through my nose and into my palate, then I spit. But I think it is important to swallow a certain amount."

James Halliday describes the tutorial as "the most exclusive wine school in the world".

"There is nothing else like it," echoes Riggs. He is referring to the fact that overseas, commercial wine associations do not, as a rule, give away \$15,000 bottles of wine and foot the bill for five top wine experts to stay in a luxury resort for a week and pass on their knowledge to the next generation of wine experts.

The tutorial's success is a tribute to the man awarded an OBE and an OAM for putting

TOP DROPS: The annual tutorial, started by the late Len Evans, below, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the select few young wine scholars chosen to participate.



fine Australian wine on the world stage. Len Evans may have passed away in 2006, but his dreams live on in his Hunter Valley heartland and far beyond, in cellars across the world, in the new breed of Australian wine judges, winemakers, sommeliers, wine journalists, retailers and restaurateurs who have won places on this highly contested tutorial program.

"Len's vision was to create a wine school that would help our younger industry people get to understand the great wines of the world and therefore where Australia sits in the big scheme," Riggs says.

"It was originally focused on judging, but now it is about getting better sommeliers, retailers and wine writers out there well

equipped to 'sell' Australian wine."

Each year, the tutorial scholar with the best nose and palate is rewarded handsomely with a coveted dux's title, a business-class return trip to Europe, a guaranteed place as an associate judge at the Sydney, Canberra and New Zealand wine shows, and introductions to the best wine houses in Europe.

The influence of the tutorial is prodigious. Former Len Evans Tutorial scholars now turn up as judges at wine shows throughout the land.

The class of 2008 have bonded halfway through Monday and are best friends with the tutors by the time they get to the \$1200 bottles of champagne at Tower Lodge on Melbourne Cup day.

Most of the women, however, are beginning to pine for a toothbrush and several have

badly stained teeth – an occupational hazard for a wine taster.

The clue to picking the 2008 dux may well lie in the colour of the scholar's smile.

All the scholars insist the week is so special really won't matter who wins the title.

"Just being at this tutorial is reward enough. We will all be delighted for whoever gets dux," sommelier at Sydney's Catalina restaurant, Simon Curkovic, insists.

As the week draws to a close, the tutors huddle over a complex scoring grid and debate points for scholars who match gold, miss golds, or fail to explain wines scored too high or too low.

Asked about her enthusiasm for high gold, the Melbourne Age food and wine writer Jane Faulkner responds that she just can't help but be excited about the quality and



"How, indeed, can you think at all after you have drunk six glasses of red from a \$25,000 carton of the world's best wine?"

range of the wines. Ben Moehtar, president of the Australian Sommeliers Association, with a pedigree at Sydney restaurants MG Garag Wildfire and Delicado Foods and Wines, reveals a wicked penchant for "naked" wine and flyaway dresses.

Raul Moreno, head sommelier at Melbourne's exclusive Vue de Monde restaurant, tutors the tutors in Spanish, while Curkovic, a law graduate turned sommelier who does the buying for Catalina's \$1.5 million wine cellar, is scoring high on matching golds.

Another high-scorer is Negociants sales

manager Adam O'Neill, whose company specialises in importing and distributing wines at the top end of the market, while the dark horse in the back row, quietly spoken West Australian winemaker Larissa Bray, consistently picks vintages and delivers beguiling descriptions of the top wines.

More confident about their selections are the Hilton's Glass Brasserie head sommelier Kim Bickley and Sarah Fagan, a no-nonsense country girl from a Cowra beef cattle farm who has found her vocation as a winemaker for De Bortoli Wines.

The senior winemaker for Taylors Wines, Helen McCarthy, and Wolf Blass's red wine maker Shavaughn Wells, who has brought with her to Pokolbin her four-month-old baby boy and a babysitting husband, reveal an impressive knowledge of the fruits of the

do you distinguish the length and power of the Romanee-Conti from the racing finesse of the \$3500 La Tache, or the robust strength of the \$3000 Richebourg from the less complicated \$1200 Grands Echezeaux?

How, indeed, can you think at all after you have drunk six glasses of red from a \$25,000 carton of the world's best wine?

A dozen pairs of nostrils flair visibly as James Halliday introduces this exclusive DRC master class. It is unlikely these scholars will ever again meet such sensory perfection.

"The Romanee-Conti is that marvellous combination of finesse and power. Even at \$15,000 a bottle, it is worth putting a lot of money into the ring just to get a look in," Halliday says.

"You can thank Evans for this tasting opportunity – he still has enormous influence."

completeness about it."

Ms Bray's assessment: "The Romanee-Conti had beautiful poise and restraint, with such seamless oak/fruit/acid integration – no one part stood apart from the others, just flavours that lingered and lingered ... I loved that this wine had such power yet such restraint and elegance."

Final papers submitted, the scholars float out into the Pokolbin morning for a glass of celebratory Billecart-Salmon Rose champagne.

"You have all shown exceptional talent. You have exceeded any group of prior scholars, but you have left us with a horrible job of deciding the dux, because the results are so very close," Halliday tells them.

Trish Evans announces the dux – a surprised Larissa Bray, whose acid-stained teeth light



THANK EVANS: From left, two sample wines including the \$15,000 bottle of Romanee-Conti; the judging panel; scholar Sarah Fagan tries a red; and fellow scholar Helen McCarthy checks her notes. PICTURES: RYAN OSLAND

vine, while Printhe Wines winemaker Drew Tuckwell never fails to produce a strong argument and poetic judgement.

The tutorial's final and dux-deciding master class session is the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti (DRC) tasting, which brings to mind the Evans dictum: "Life is too short to drink bad wine."

The scholars must pick which of their six reds is poured from the \$15,000 bottle of Romanee-Conti, which is the \$1500 Romanee St Vivant, which is the \$1200 Echezeaux. How

Over the next hour, the scholars, judges and pourers give themselves up to the pleasures of drinking the best wine on the planet, the scholars' appreciation tempered by the need to pick which of the six reds is in which glass. That dux's prize is in the offing, after all.

Curkovic identifies all six wines, his closest rivals managing only two. His assessment of the Romanee-Conti: "I was awestruck by this wine. I thought it was very perfumed. It was closed, but it had a harmony and

up a true oenologist's smile. "To have even got here to the tutorial in the first place was my achievement. I just want to say thank you to everyone. I really appreciate what I have been able to taste and the knowledge that has been passed on from all of you."

Scholar Adam O'Neill describes the week as "the vintner's opportunity of a lifetime".

The last word belongs to Len Evans: "Wine is a great drink, but it's a drink, it's the juice of fermented grapes. So drink the bloody stuff and shut up and get on with it." **W**