

Happy birthday **Len**

Sally Evans marks the 90th birthday of her father, wine legend Len Evans, and what should have been the 20th year of the Len Evans Tutorial.



My dad loved a birthday party – his own, that is. He would invite squads of pals to the Hunter for a weekend of games, feasts, singing, and of course, wine. They were joyous times indeed. This year he would have turned 90, so it would have been a doozy. Another celebration missed since he left us for the Cellar In The Sky in 2006.

He should also be celebrating another big milestone this year, the 20th anniversary of the Len Evans Tutorial, the

very special wine school he created back in 2001.

In the mid 1950s a very young Leonard Paul Evans left his home in a sleepy seaside Suffolk town and jumped on a ship from England to New Zealand. He wanted to become a professional golfer and reckoned he had more of a chance of making it big in a country with a much smaller population. Always a cunning one, my dad. He had but a few shillings in his pocket and worked off his free passage cutting timber for the

NZ Forestry Commission round Nelson. Jump forward 50 years and we find him across the ditch in the vineyards of the Hunter Valley, the granddaddy of the Australian wine industry, presiding over what is regarded by many as the world's best wine school. There was of course a lot of action in between: jackaroo, glass washer, stock controller, F&B manager, hotelier, restaurateur, wine writer, TV personality, public speaker, philanthropist, wine producer, chateau owner. It was a colourful life indeed. ▷



Tucked in amongst all these adventures was a long career as a wine judge. He started judging in the 1960s when the wine industry was still in its infancy, and continued until 2000, having been the long-term Chief Judge of a great many wine shows in Australia and abroad.

A mentor for quality

An integral part of wine show judging is mentorship, teaching the next generation of wine professionals about quality: what it looks like and how to achieve it. He loved this part of the job, and over the years expanded the wine show education program with dinners and master classes designed to expose young judges to great wines well beyond the reach of most, often sourced from his own cellar. Australia's leading show judges were always keen to support the Chair and regularly joined in.

When Len retired from show judging in 2000, he knew he would miss the opportunity to share wine and wisdom with the next raft of up-and-comers. So he hatched a plan. He would put together a fabulous week of wine education for a carefully selected group of wine scholars (as he called them), a mini-wine school featuring a series of intense workshops, master classes and dinners. He would host it at Tower Lodge, his boutique hotel in the centre of Pokolbin.

There were 12 rooms in the hotel, so he would invite 12 scholars. He asked 12 wine companies to support each placement, he assembled his close mates James Halliday, Iain Riggs, Brian Croser, Ian McKenzie of Seppelt's fame and importer Gary Steel as his panel of expert tutors and cajoled a bunch of local winemakers to pour and clear (in return for the odd taste or two).

The Len Evans Tutorial was born. In the ensuing 20 years, more than 220 talented young(ish) wine professionals have passed through the Tutorial's doors. The list of alumni reads like a who's who of the modern Australian industry. They have been taught by an evolving super-group of Australian wine gurus, with several of the early scholars now joining the ranks as tutors. And so the baton is passed from generation to generation.

Keen hopefuls from all over the country submit their applications year after year, hoping to secure one of the coveted spots. They are assessed by a panel of past and present tutors and scholars, who decide which of the candidates are ready to undergo the rigours of the program. The panel works hard to balance the group by region, work background, gender and age.

Their aim is to create a cohesive group who will learn as much from each other



Clockwise from opposite page:
 LET Scholars hard at work in the tasting room. Tutors Ian McKenzie, James Halliday and Iain Riggs; Sally Evans with some of the 2019 pouring crew on presentation day. 2019 LET Scholars and their tutors.



All photos on this page: Chris Eltes

as from their tutors. During the week they are put through a series of tasting exercises following a range of different varietal and regional themes. It's hard work. They will be scored almost all the time and their comments noted, for at the end of the week a Dux is announced, who will be rewarded with an international air ticket and introductions to the best wine houses in the world.

Broadening the perspective

They will be tutored on how to assess wine, with a view to becoming a better wine judge. Len wanted to improve the skills of young wine judges, and to increase the pool of well-qualified tasting professionals available for the wine show system. In the early 2000s he felt that wine judging had become too myopic, too technical, that the industry needed to broaden its outlook.

He wanted young judges to get a better global perspective by analysing the great wines of the world alongside the best Australian wines, both as young and more mature wines. He wanted to give them the vocabulary and confidence to show the world that Australia was a wine force to be reckoned with.

In recent years the remit of the LET has moved beyond Len's initial wine-judging focus. Whilst it is still an important aspect of the process, it is now equally about helping the scholars identify excellence, to be proud of what Australia is capable of, and to have the tools to tell the world. It is also about improving the diversity of our top wine people, beyond just technical, mostly male, winemakers.

In 2016 the Len Evans Tutorial was awarded the highly-coveted Maurice O'Shea Trophy for its outstanding contribution to the Australian wine industry.

The accolade is presented only once every three years, so it was high recognition by the industry of all the LET has achieved.

A team effort

There should have been a huge crowd on the stage, like an Oscar's Best Picture Award. The success of the LET is a tribute to the stewardship of local hero Riggs, to the loyalty and expertise of Halliday and MacKenzie as lead tutors, to the behind-the-scenes contribution of the Hunter winemakers who work so hard year after year to make it all happen. A few tiny drops of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti may come their way, but it's a small reward for their efforts. They all are volunteers.

And of course, none of this would happen without the financial support of many high-minded Australian wine companies, a significant proportion of which are Hunter-based, such as ▷

HUNTER STORIES

HUNTER DUXES

Nerves, excitement and a little bit of disbelief were all part of my first morning of the LET. My expectations had been set by tales from past scholars. The entire week was nothing short of astounding. To taste wines you had only been able to read about was a revelation. The tutors were so forthcoming with their knowledge and experience. The back of house team created a seamless flow between sessions and dinners. The interaction and the fun we had between our group of scholars and the tutors was a highlight for me. The nightly dinners are the best wine dinners I have ever experienced and the 11 scholars I shared the week with all taught me so much! **Adam Walls, Wine Buyer at Wine Selectors, Dux 2019**



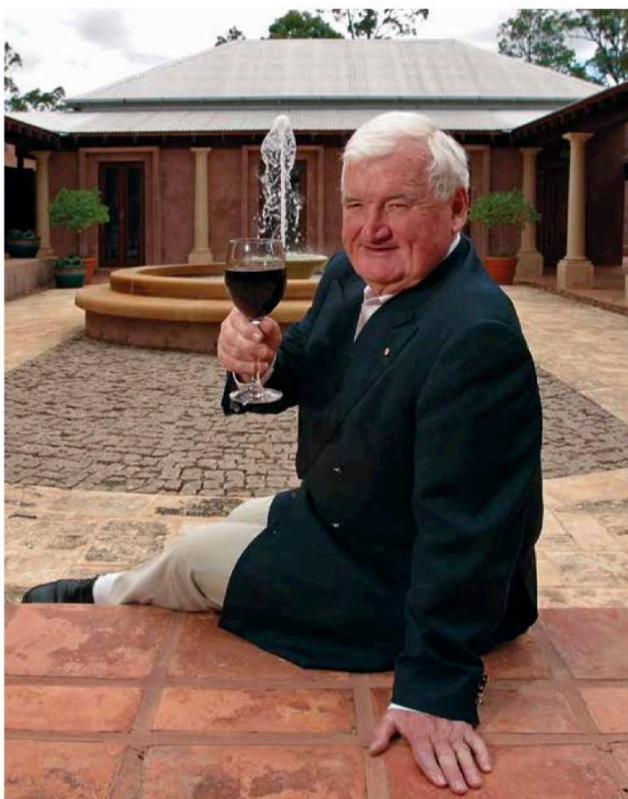
The Evans Tutorial is the most enjoyable and thought provoking week in my career in the wine industry. The opportunity to contrast and compare the finest Australian wines with the great wines of the world at scale is truly unique.

Add to that the experience, knowledge and generosity of the tutors; the camaraderie with my fellow scholars, it all combines to make one of the great institutions in Australian wine and long may it reign. **Stuart Hordern, Senior Winemaker, Brokenwood Wines, Dux 2016**

From polishing glasses to the most amazing experience of being named Dux in 2006, the Len Evans Tutorial has become part of my life. The week is always different and amazing, it has kept growing and adapting with the calibre of the wines always on point. I look back at the photos of myself in 2006 and



the emotion is still so real. As a young female it threw me head first into the world of wine show judging, I loved it then and I still love it. **Liz Silkman, Chief Winemaker, First Creek Wines, Dux 2006**



Tyrrell's, Brokenwood, Mount Pleasant, McGuigan Wines and the Trevor Drayton Foundation. Their desire to contribute to the greater good of the industry echoes that of primary benefactor and Len's long time chum, Basil Sellers.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am a director and trustee of the Len Evans Tutorial, and am so proud of all it has achieved. It's lovely to be able to share a bit about both the Tutorial and my dear old dad with the Hunter community that was so dear to him for so long.

We are often asked why the LET is still always held in the Hunter Valley. To me this seems obvious. Tower Lodge is sadly no longer a part of the picture, with the Tutorial now expertly hosted by Spicers Guesthouse. But the Hunter was Dad's favourite place, his home for more than 20 years, where he built Rothbury Estate,

Tower Estate, and our magical house on the hill, Loggerheads. He is there still, in every corner.

But more importantly it is where his extended family is, the Hunter Valley winemakers he mentored as youngsters, who are committed to delivering his vision well into the future. Where else could it be held?

My sister Jodie and I are always there for the presentations at the end of the Tutorial week. Each year we are delighted to see the tired yet awe-struck faces of the 12 scholars and know that our dad would be content to see them so exhausted yet so inspired. He would be thrilled that his baby is still going strong 20 years on. It somehow seems fair that this year's celebrations are all cancelled due to the pandemic. It wouldn't have been the same without him.

Happy 90th birthday Dad.