

SHOW TIME

FOR 25 YEARS

Brokenwood winemaker Iain Riggs this year ended a 25-year affiliation with the Sydney Royal Wine Show – the past six as chairman of judges. The quality of the wines – and judging – have come a long way in that time.

How did your affiliation with the show start?

I had been invited to judge the show every year since I lobbied in the Hunter in 1983, but of course it was always held in the middle of vintage and I was working by myself, so there was no way I could get down there. In 1990 Richard Eastick took over as assistant winemaker and so I thought, bugger it, I'll disappear and do the show. I started as an associate.

So you had to work your way up through the ranks?

God yes! This was during the Len Evans regime and we all spent bloody years and years on the associate bench before someone died and we could move up.

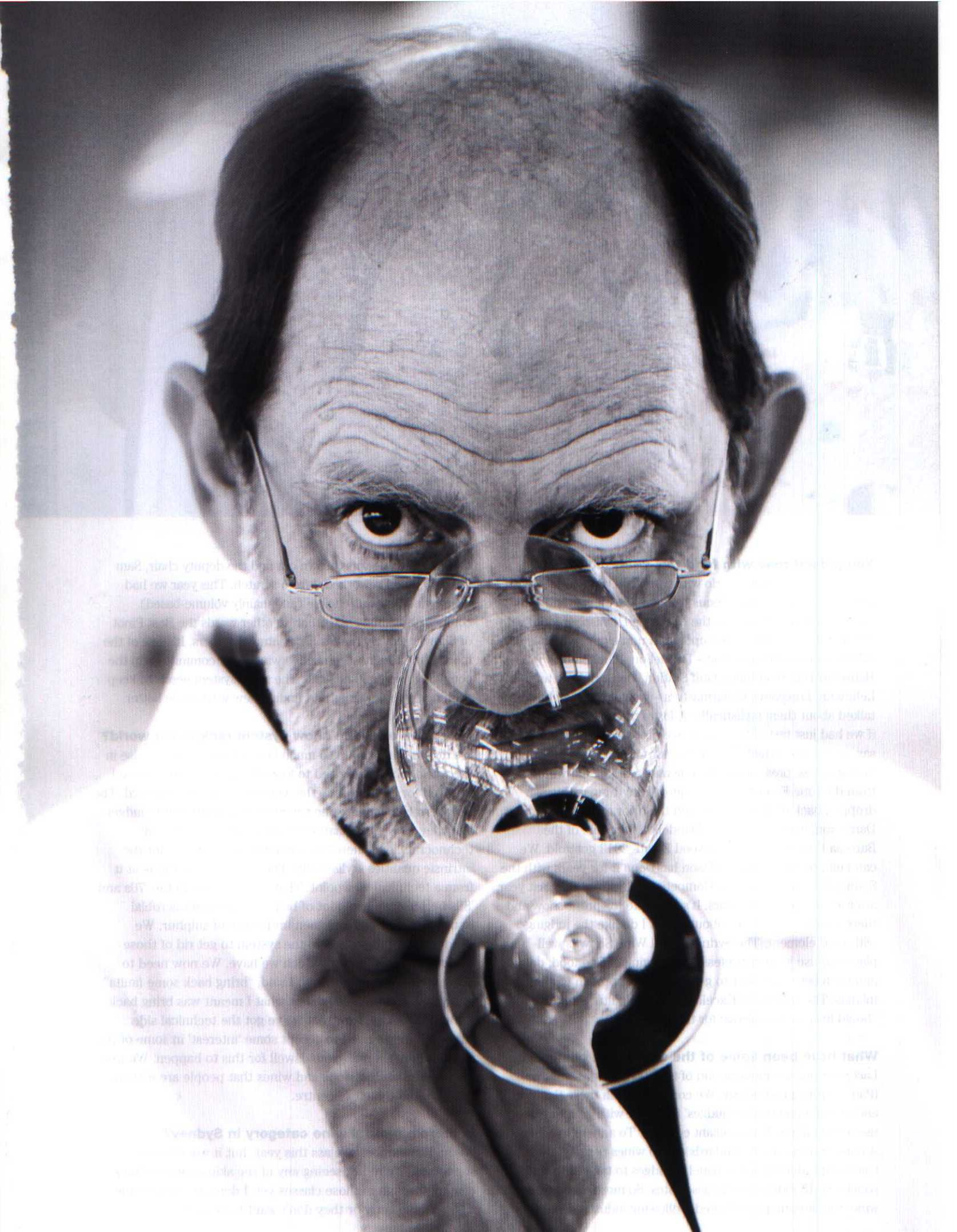
What are your early memories of Len Evans?

Len took over the Adelaide Wine Show in 1988 and I was an associate judge there. Back then, the associate's role was to be seen, not heard. Len knew how to 'manipulate' a wine show and the judges around him. He was always giving grief to James Halliday and Brian Croser. Lalou Bize-Leroy of DRC was judging at Canberra and she had a wine she really liked, but it was quite volatile. Halliday and Croser were getting their knickers in a knot because this wine had volatility and Len wouldn't back down. Len looked at it and said, "that's fine, that's worthy of a gold medal" and of course Halliday's eye-brows nearly turned inside-out. Croser was fuming at the

indignity of it. When Bize-Leroy got out of ear-shot Halliday and Croser turned on Evans, who just looked at them and said, "But my dear chaps, all wine has volatility" and walked off. He was a great mentor, along with Croser and Halliday, just like we try to be mentors to all up-and-coming crew in the show system now. We didn't have the Len Evans Tutorial back then; it existed in the form of Len doing a few dinners during the judging where only the associates spoke about the wines. We often had to tell jokes and sing. Luckily, Nick Bullied and Vanya Cullen could sing so that got the rest of us off the hook. Geoff Merrill could tell some outrageous jokes, so he could appease Len. I still remember Len's last year, 2000, when he stepped down as chair after thirty-odd years. He wanted his old mates back. He wrote to us and said: "This is my last year. If you want to be involved, I'd like to have you there, but you'll be dropped back to being an associate." The likes of Tim James, Merrill and Vanya all said, "Yeah, we want to be part of your last show in Sydney." It was the strongest line-up of associates ever seen in a wine show. That was great fun.

Evans didn't like people bringing dud wine, did he?

No. He just wouldn't allow them on the table. He would make some withering comment and you'd slink off back to the corner with your bottle of TR2 or something.





You judged rosé with food this year, didn't you?

Yes, it wasn't anything to do with 'wine has to be judged with food', it was to get some focus back on rosé. It has had the biggest increase in sales in the Northern Hemisphere and yet in Australia it is still looked upon as a non-event, which is odd. All the wines in the running – Dandelion, Paracombe, Hahndorf Hill, Wolf Blass, Gulf Station, De Bortoli, Peter Lehmann, Longview, Cellarmasters – we got them all back and talked about them stylistically. A lot of them rely on sugar, and if we had just tasted them as is, we probably would have got, say, six bronze, which is what we normally get for rosé. But by having olives, bread and cured meats – gold medal-winners from the Fine Food Show in Sydney – anything with sugar dropped back in the rankings and the drier ones, like Dandelion, came to the fore. Dandelion Fairytale of the Barossa Rosé 2013 and Wellwood Estate 2013 got gold. We can build on this. Warren Mason has done it for years with the Sydney International Wine Competition. I judged that last year after an absence of 23 years. It's a private for-profit show and there's things I don't like about it, but I do like the judging-with-food element. The Sydney Royal Wine Show is well-placed to use its very professional judging of fine food, dairy and even beer and cider to get a holistic approach to all its medals. The charter is 'Excellence in Agriculture' but this should lead to 'Excellence for the Consumer'.

What have been some of the significant changes?

Last year saw the introduction of the 100-point system and iPad recording technology. We continued with these this year and by implementing the judges' feedback with greater ease of use for the iPads. It's a brilliant concept. To adhere to accepted Australian wine show standards of 130 wines per day, the committee added another panel of judges to take us to six panels. So 18 judges and 12 associates. So more time and every wine was thoroughly evaluated. Following industry feedback

the old schedule was thrown out and the deputy chair, Sam Connew, and I reworked it from scratch. This year we had every wine that was eligible (and mainly volume-based) competing against each other. In other words the Best Pinot of Show is exactly that: it has beaten allcomers. It's one of the most, if not the most, proactive wine show committees in the country. It never stands still. The show system needs to keep pushing the boundaries and finding new ways to do better.

How does our wine show system rank in the world?

We do our wine shows so much better than anywhere else in the world, but we do need to look at our styles. Having food involved for the first time this year was a big step forward. The Northern Hemisphere see themselves as purely style judges, and they view Australian wine shows as purely run by technocrats, and therefore we don't have any feel for the intrinsic qualities stylistically. They think we just look at it from a technical viewpoint. That was the case in the '70s and '80s because we had a lot of bad wine, a lot of microbial issues and over-use and then under-use of sulphur. We needed to bring a rigour to the system to get rid of those obvious technical faults. Which we have. We now need to bring back some complexity. I said, "bring back some faults" in my speech at the show, but what I meant was bring back some complexity. Now that we've got the technical side wrapped up, we need to accept some 'interest' in some of the wines. There's a real groundswell for this to happen. We saw the success of Rootstock and wines that people are making that are slightly left of centre.

Is there a natural wine category in Sydney?

We had an exhibition class this year, but it wasn't well supported. We're not seeing any of the skin-contact whites coming through in those classes yet. I don't know if people think it's too early or they don't want to be seen as

mainstream. There's some cowboys out there who want to remain on the edge of things. They wouldn't dare be seen entering a capital city wine show.

Is Australia producing its best wines ever?

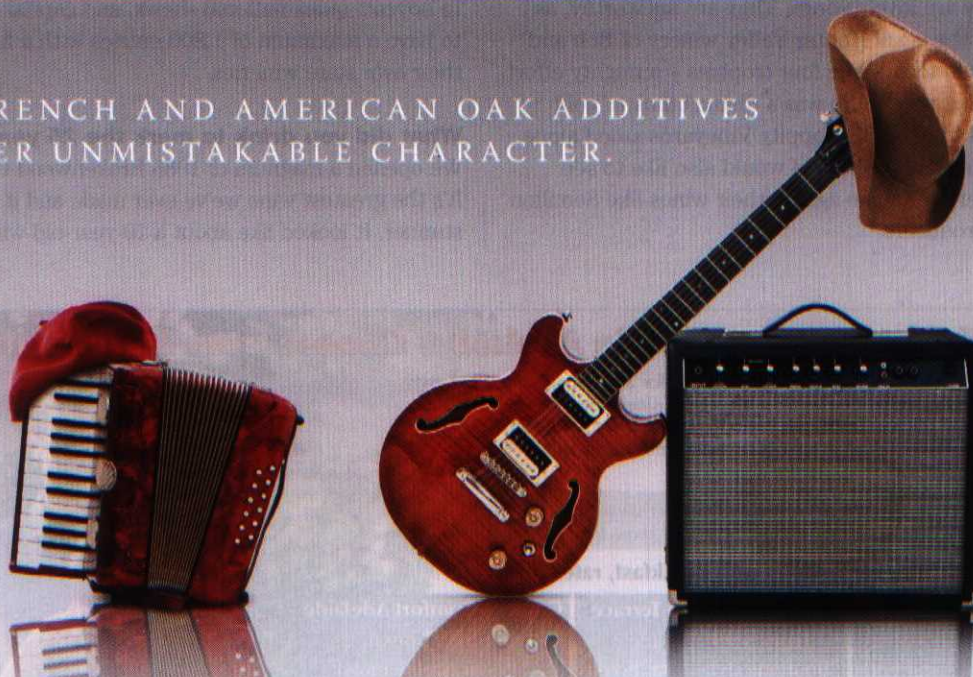
Yes. My first vintage was in 1972, so I've seen an enormous change in wine styles. The tipping point in the '70s was the 1975 vintage. Croser made his Hardys Siegedorf Riesling. It either got gold or disqualified. Shows had sugar regulations. That wine was such a turning point for the industry and swung momentum in favour of whites over reds. At the same time Murray Tyrrell was getting his Vat 47 up and running, so that was coming into the wine shows. Then for some reason in the late '70s and early '80s the industry thought that red wines were better at 10.5 to 11 percent alcohol; some were okay but there was a lot of green, unripe wines made. Then '82, '84 and '86 were turning-point vintages where we dramatically swung to quality reds but the industry went from 90 percent red to 20 percent in six years. Then the Chardonnay era was upon us; everyone had to have a Chardonnay through the early '90s and it's been that way ever since. We've been making good reds at the same time – and great Chardonnay – and it's just been a refinement of all those wine styles from that point. We started making some classy Chardonnays and that was the birth of Yattarna. Wolf

Blass made a Reserve Chardonnay in 1994 that could have been one of Australia's greatest whites, but it had 100 percent cork taint. It all ended up being tipped down the sink. In the late '90s we started making great Semillon and medium-bodied Shiraz. Then the Parker era with McLaren Vale and Barossa Shiraz. I suppose that was something we had to have; we probably could have done without it, but it did put Australia on the map in terms of our red wine. It all fell over as quickly as it started. I'm looking forward to the future. In the Hunter, the winemaking talent we have here and how they're looking at the Hunter product is to be commended. We're looking at what our forebears did – Maurice O'Shea and Murray Tyrrell and those guys – using field blends, red over white skins, white over red skins and large oak, trying to dissect what they did in the 1940s and '50s and see if we can't replicate that and make something so uniquely Hunter that nowhere else in Australia can do it.

Has the standard of judge improved over the years?

No question. The Len Evans Tutorial has had a big part to play in that. The depth and quality of judges we've got coming through has never been better. Len started the Tutorial because he could see that the show system was dominated by winemakers and we were never going to move away from that sort of straight technical judging. We had to

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embrace style judging. The Tutorial is really a step up from those wine dinners where guys and girls are exposed to some of the greatest wines in the world that they would otherwise not have a chance to see. We've had some terrific success getting the likes of Mike Bennie, Dave Brookes and Ben Edwards into the show system. They're not winemakers, they don't have a technical background, but they do drink wine broadly and know what is out there in the world.

What were the highlights of this year's show?

We saw the outstanding 2012 and 2013 vintages and the bulk of the 144 medals came from these two. Adelaide Hills scored a double with best red and best white. There was just under a 50 percent strike rate for the show, so one in every two wines was medalled – up from 45.5 percent last year. Dry red numbers topped whites by 246 entries, but white wine was awarded 65 golds compared to 64 for red wine, nicely reflecting the production and consumer preferences in Australia at present. Shiraz dominated the red golds but Cabernet Sauvignon was very close behind – 23 versus 20. Semillon just edged out Chardonnay, 20 golds to 18. The ageing ability of Semillon continues to astonish, and vintages ranged from 2005 through to 2013. New and emerging varieties and styles that caught our attention included a Vermentino in the whites and a very slurpy (that's technical wine social media talk) Montepulciano from Brown Brothers. Another highlight was the improvement of Tahrilik with its Marsannes. They are lovely wines. They are ageworthy, as is Semillon, and the small Hunter Valley winery of Bob and Maryanne McLeish took home four trophies – a mighty effort. On a disappointing note there was a distinct lack of gold medal red wines from NSW. Moppity Vineyards stood alone with two gold medals for Shiraz. I would also like to see Riesling producers get some age on their wines like Semillon and Marsanne producers.

Are there too many wine shows in Australia?

No question. The industry I see is not overflowing with spare cash yet we continue to support many pseudo-national and private enterprise (for-profit) shows. Large companies are just as much to blame as small. Carpet-bombing entries to achieve a maximum 'bling-rate' and a bit of silverware keeps these shows going, when there is no real need for them to exist. There's no useful feedback to the exhibitors, nor do they advance the wine industry in any way. The capital city wine shows need to look to the future. One way of taking ownership of their state and helping their state's wine industry might be to accept only medal wines from interstate shows, but accept all entries, medal or not, from their own state wineries. And maybe accept more entries from state regional shows that have medalled? A hierarchical system of wine shows is not out of reach. The wine industry has created a machine and we need to step back and say, "This is not the best use of our dwindling cash." A capital city wine show of say 30 senior and associate judges gets (conservatively) \$60,000 worth of free labour. Yes, Melbourne has started to offer some decent reimbursement but that \$60,000 is carried by the wine industry. With the large number of shows we currently have and quite a number giving zero back to the wine industry, it is quite possible we give up \$750,000 in labour. When entry fees, time and wine samples are costed out, the wine show industry is worth about \$6 million. And with very little accountability. We need to boycott quasi-national shows, and capital city shows need to have a maximum of 1,800 entries with a favour towards their own state wineries.

What did you drink to mark the 25 years?

We opened a magnum of 1986 Brokenwood Graveyard Shiraz. It's the greatest wine we've ever made and it was a absolute stunner. It looked like about a 10-year-old wine. ■

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