

# A LANDMARK EVENT

Although the international media have hammered Australia's image in the past few years, wine critics and writers are keen to be invited to the Landmark Tutorial, where they can taste some of the country's most important wines. Simon Hirtzel reports on this unique venture.



**The participants in the 2010 Landmark Tutorial were chosen because they are influencers in their own countries. They spent their week tasting some of the best wines the country has ever produced, and meeting winemakers and senior members of the wine trade.**

There are few organisations in the world that would consider regularly presenting a line-up of 250 benchmark wines with an estimated worth of AU\$60,000 (€45,000), many of them old and exceedingly rare, exclusively for a select group of international guests. Wine Australia's Landmark Tutorial is one of the most significant investments by the Australian wine industry to showcase its finest wines to a global audience.

Participation is offered to influential wine professionals from Australia's key export markets who are flown into the country and hosted in five-star accommodation for a week of tastings under the guidance of noted Australian experts.

The inspiration for the tutorial came from a similar event created by an Australian wine legend.

## *The birth of an idea*

The late Len Evans AO OBE was famously generous for sharing his knowledge and experience of fine wines throughout his 40-year career. Evans longed to foster a new gen-

eration of wine judges. In 2001, he founded the annual Len Evans tutorial, which gives Australians interested in wine the opportunity to taste rare, historic European and Australian wines in five days of intensive tastings, master classes and wine dinners.

In 2007 Paul Henry, then Wine Australia's General Manager, was invited to the Len Evans tutorial as the Brokenwood Scholar. The experience inspired Henry to propose that Australia should create a forum to show its iconic wines to the world - the category of ultra-premium, collectable wines, promoted by Wine Australia under the banner of 'A+ Australian wine'. Along with Lucy Anderson, then Wine Australia's Marketing Manager, Henry developed the concept and launched the Landmark Tutorial in 2009. "I remember thinking how profound it could be to have a narrative tool to influence the opinions of international media, educators and gatekeepers about the relevant standing of Australian wine," he said.

Respected wine critic and author James Halliday AM applauds the link between the tutori-

als: "It was exactly the sort of spin-off that Len Evans would have been tickled pink to see."

As the Landmark Tutorial began, Australian wine was fighting an image crisis overseas. "Australia's image has arguably become the most problematic part of its equation to get right, rather than its actual commercial performance or quality," said Henry, now director of branding strategy company, winehero.

Australian wine is often misrepresented in international media. "Australia still has by far the largest share of the UK market and if you read what the average journalist was saying about Australian wine you'd ask 'how on earth can this be?' Of course the answer is, at the bottom end of the market consumers are purely price- and discount-driven and wouldn't read a wine column from one year to the next," said Halliday.

Producers of Australia's iconic wines welcomed the Landmark Tutorial concept, realising that it complemented their own global promotional strategies. Guests - invited by Wine Australia or self-nominated - are evaluated on their experience and sphere of influence. "The potential benefit of the tutorial had to extend far beyond the actual number of participants," said Henry.

## *The tasting begins*

The inaugural 2009 tutorial hosted 12 of the world's most influential wine media and educators at The Louise in the Barossa Valley; 14 attended the 2010 event at Chateau Yering in the Yarra Valley. "By moving the tutorial around the country in a democratic fashion, there was an opportunity to unlock an emerging sense of regional identity," said Henry.

The guest list reads like a Who's Who of Australia's top export markets: UK, Canada, US, Denmark, Germany, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and Finland. Tutorial sessions are presented by leading Australian industry figures including Robert Hill Smith AM MW, Tim Kirk, Jeffrey Grosset, James Halliday, Andrew Caillard MW, Stephen Pannell and Vanya Cullen. "I think it is an incredibly

good way of bringing the A+ Australian wine message to opinion makers selected from our major markets," said Halliday.

"Australia has become famous for technology, and our detractors say we that make industrial wine," said Andrew Caillard, fine wine principal at Langton's and Woolworths Liquor Group. "In fact there's been a fine wine industry in Australia for nearly 200 years - these wines are as compelling as anything else anywhere in the world."

Each tutorial costs approximately A\$ 200,000 (€150,000) to host. In 2009 and 2010, up to 20% of funding came from the South Australian and Victorian state governments, respectively; the rest was raised from businesses allied to the wine industry. Sponsors such as export partners, glass manufacturers, printers and packaging producers saw that supporting a high-profile educational initiative would align their businesses with Australia's fine wine category. "It was a perspective that we encouraged and one that the partners shared with their funding," said Henry.

One of the highlights of the tutorial is the historic master class. "The chance to taste wines like 1962 Penfolds Bin 60A, one of the greatest wines ever produced in Australia, and see it still looking stunningly beautiful is a very moving experience for people who are into wine," said Caillard.

"In an extraordinary act of generosity, Robert Hill Smith donated an original Maurice O'Shea [1942 Mt Pleasant YT Light Dry Red Shiraz] of which I think there are probably about three bottles in existence...maybe two now," said Henry.

Henry also recounted Halliday's enthusiasm to share during the Yarra Valley tutorial. "Particularly after a class he would rush home and return to dinner saying, 'I hope you don't mind, I've just found these,' which everybody found wonderfully spontaneous and exciting."

But Caillard is concerned about declining stocks of rare Australian wines, saying the rate of depletion in the last five years is "quite alarming".

## Results?

As with any organisation managed with a keen sense of governance, Wine Australia must show a return on its investment.

"It's awfully hard to measure in clinical financial terms - the bean counters hate it and the winemakers and those who are passionate about wine love it," said Halliday.



**"The Landmark Tutorial completely changed the way I write, teach and think about Australian wine. I was struck most by the historical richness and regional differences of the wines."**

**Barbara Philip MW,**  
Canada, 2009 Landmark  
Tutorial participant

Annabel Mugford, Wine Australia's key relationships manager, explains that returns are measured in short-, medium- and long-term outcomes. Survey feedback collected from tutorial participants is considered a short-term measure. Wine Australia directors posted overseas connect with past guests to monitor how they're using tutorial material or disseminating knowledge to their markets - a medium-term measure. Karen MacNeil, author of *The Wine Bible*, and a 2010 Landmark Tutorial guest, hosted a Wine Australia tasting in Los Angeles. "So a medium-term measurement is showing that someone like Karen MacNeil, who's well-respected in the US, is prepared to not only put her name to something but to actually host it," said Mugford.

To quantify long-term returns, Wine Australia continually monitors the value of international media coverage. "In terms of a \$2bn export industry, investing \$200,000 to tell an engaging, future-proofing story isn't a disproportionate return on investment," said Henry.

The Wine Australia board has decided to hold future tutorials every two or three years rather than annually, indicating that the next tutorial may take place within the next Australian financial year. There's also talk of moving the events offshore. "It's been suggested

that perhaps we should place people in, for example, one of the top hotels in Shanghai and run the tutorial there," said Mugford.

Caillard believes the tutorial should stay in Australia, giving participants the opportunity to meet winemakers, walk in the vineyards, touch the places where wines are made and get a sense of the industry's passion and history. "You don't get that in a five-star hotel in Shanghai," he said.

Halliday sees a move overseas as potentially viable, "as long as you've got five or six key speakers who can cover the ground." He predicts that Wine Australia is going to be even more focused on the Asian market in the future.

In October 2011 Halliday wrote in *The Weekend Australian Magazine* that the average price of Australian wine imports by China was US\$5.58 per litre, just behind French wine at \$5.64 per litre. "Given the fact that we know there are some really expensive top-end, first-growth Bordeaux going into China, there obviously has to be an awful lot of low-priced Languedoc-Roussillon, or wherever it may come from," he said.

Dr Edward Ragg of Dragon Phoenix Fine Wine Consulting in China, and a 2010 Landmark Tutorial participant, hopes Australia's high quality control and range of wine styles will influence China's new wine drinkers. "This is especially important given the Francophilia that engulfs China," he said.

Halliday points to a relatively untapped potential market for Australia: "India's obviously going to happen in much the same way as the development of the Chinese market where it's just gone completely nuts, and not in the way we would have expected." He is also optimistic that Asian consumers will realise there are good reasons to drink Australian white wine as much as red: "Whites are cheaper and they are ideal for a broader selection of Asian cuisine - and that includes Indian curries to the extreme."

Ragg believes the Chinese palate is highly receptive to Australian wines. "As we see in repeated blind-tasting exercises in China, Australia's broad brush of aromas, flavours and textures tends to go down better with Chinese tasters than the more acidic, astringent examples of certain wines from France, especially young red Bordeaux," he said.

Whether Australia's international image can be enhanced by an elite group of Landmark Tutorial ambassadors may take years to realise. ■