

## DOWN CELLAR

In Memoriam: *Len Evans*By *Jim Bryant*

While I always enjoy bringing you the latest information on great wines, this month I wanted honor one of the wine industry's most notable individuals, Len Evans of Australia, who died on August 17, 2006.

Len was the most famous personality in the history of Australian wine. He is known to be the person who conceived the strategic plan behind Australia's significant wine success story of the last ten years. But Len was far more than a successful businessman.

I had the good fortune to meet him in the early 1990s at the California Wine Experience, where he was the co-moderator. It must have been obvious to Len that I shared his profound love of wine, as he "adopted" me straightaway, and we developed a long and deep friendship. He invited me to visit him several times at his estate, Loggerheads, in the Hunter Valley, which is located in a wine-growing region in Sydney, New South Wales.

As his guest (and as the guest of his wife, Trish), I found that I agreed wholeheartedly with writers everywhere who dubbed him the world's most generous host. Len was well-versed and deeply involved in multiple fields; he was a public speaker; author (multiple books); storyteller; golfer; wine writer, marketer, producer, and judge; restaurateur; artist; sculptor; and business executive. For all his accomplishments, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE), the Order of Australia (OA),

*Jim Bryant joins Trish and Len Evans for dinner in Roberts Restaurant at Evans's Tower Estate in Hunter Valley, Australia.*



*Jim Bryant and the late Len Evans, arguably Australia's most famous wine personality, take a sampling of the 2004 release of wines made by Evans's Tower Estate in Australia.*

and *Decanter* magazine's Person of the Year (1997), among many other wine honors.

However, his friends and acquaintances remember him most for being the ultimate raconteur and bon vivant—a witty and vivacious man who simply lived to share his wine and knowledge with everyone he knew. Whether he was speaking at a wine conference or hosting an intimate gathering of friends, he always managed to impress me more than anyone I've ever met.

Apparently, I was not alone. At the Wine Experiences, the more than 1,000 participants who represent the elite of the wine world (including representatives from the top 200 winemakers as well as restaurant owners, importers, exporters, retailers, and dedicated consumers) would often erupt from their chairs at the end of Len's performance and give him a long standing ovation.

He was loved by the masses. In fact, he was so revered and respected in Australia that he could not travel easily due to the pressing demands on him wherever he surfaced. When I stayed at his estate, he would arrange for me to have private tastings and tours throughout the Hunter Valley during the day, and then he, Trish, and I would dine "in" each night, enjoying a delightful evening.

Len was also a great chef, and Trish is even more accomplished in the kitchen. To his famous wine cellar he and I would go (literally "down cellar!"), and he would choose many bottles—usually six to 12—to accompany our meal. He always began with great Champagne, usually Bollinger, and then the evening would progress with several wines poured for each course. Len was the master in matching food and wine.

Throughout the evening, we would play the Wine Options Game, which he invented. He would pour wines that had been put into a brown paper bag, and Trish and I would vote on whether the wine was from the northern or southern hemisphere and from which grape, country, producer, specific vineyard, and year it hailed. Whether we played this game at his home or with a conference hall full of people at a Wine Experience, it was a revelation each time I played. It was humbling, to say the least.

The only redeeming feeling was to observe Len play his own game as a judge in front of a thousand Wine Experience attendees. No other wine judge on the stage would even attempt to identify the wines, and sure enough, Len sometimes picked the wrong wine, but he was most often correct. When people asked how such a professional would risk damaging his image, he

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told the story of his friend, the world-famous wine professional Harry Waugh, who was once asked after lecturing on wine all morning whether he had ever mistaken a Bordeaux for a Burgundy. He replied, “Not since lunch.”

Len was known for many things, but his “Theory of Capacity” is especially notable. This theory was essentially a list of his ten wine commandments. Here are a few of my favorites:

**Commandment Number Five:** “People who say, ‘You can’t drink the good stuff all the time’ are talking rubbish. You *must* drink good stuff all the time. Every time you drink a bottle of inferior wine, it’s like smashing a superior bottle against the wall. The pleasure is lost forever. You can’t get that bottle back.” Len practiced this commandment every day of his life. If he was not the host, he insisted that the host open his best bottles, and the following day Len would send the requisite number of replacement bottles but at a higher quality level.

**Commandment Number Six:** “There are people who build up huge cellars, most of which they have no hope of drinking. They are foolish in overestimating their capacity, but they err on the right side, and their friends love them.” I agree wholeheartedly and plead guilty.

**Commandment Number Eight:** “Wine is not meant to be enjoyed merely for its own sake; it is the key to love and laughter with friends and to the enjoyment of food and beauty and humor and art and music. It rewards us far beyond its cost.” In fact, Len was quoted as saying, “It seems to me that the best thing about wine is sharing it with someone you like.”

**Commandment Number Nine:** In his characteristic Australian accent, Len would say, “What part is wine of your life? Ten per centum? Then ten per centum of your income should be spent on wine.” As a disciple of this commandment, I can assure you that Len adhered to it as well.

Len’s favorite Australian wines included Penfolds Grange, Penfolds Bin 707, St. Hallett Old Block Shiraz, Eileen Hardy Shiraz, Peter Lehmann Stonewell Shiraz, d’Arenberg The Dead Arm Shiraz, Elderton Command Shiraz, Tyrrells Semillon Vat 1, and Mount Pleasant Lovedale Semillon. Without exception, I share his opinion that these are some of Australia’s— as well as the world’s—finest wines.

Once he was asked if there was any twentieth-century wine in the world that he had not had but would like to try. He said, “No.” I believe that no one had ever had such great wine as did Len. Heaven has a new sommelier! 🍷

*Len Evans was an avid collector of not only wine, but also exquisite art and objects. Here, he plays the busine, a long, straight trumpet often used in Roman times, as he looks over the breathtaking grounds of Loggerheads. Lunch, anyone? Wine included, of course.*



*The entrance to Tower Estate in Hunter Valley, Australia. The brainchild of Len Evans, the estate includes a luxury hotel and conference center within its fortified Spanish hacienda-like walls.*

### The Tower Estate Tutorial: The World’s Finest Wine Education

Twelve carefully chosen participants from around the world were invited to experience the most exclusive wine school in the world, the Tower Estate Tutorial, which was founded in 2000 by Len Evans. No amount of money could buy access to this four-day, all-expenses paid event, which was held at Tower Estate in Pokolbin in the heart of Hunter Valley. Wines representing the best from their country were also invited to this exclusive school...the finest wine education on earth.

Len himself always chose the wines, representing the best of Cabernets and Chardonnays from around the globe. Two years ago, there was a break in tradition, and Evans called me and said, “Jimmy, I need some help. Will you select the best wines from your country and send them for Tutorial?” Evans asked me to avoid expensive cult wines, and to select a Chardonnay and a Cabernet wine that were accessible to most people. Six bottles of each were shipped Down Under. For me, it was the honor of a lifetime.



*Jim Bryant went “down cellar” in Len Evans’s private wine cellar, which is complete with spiral staircase and is located close to his home.*