
PETER LEHMANN

Founder

The name of Peter Lehmann, founder of the company, is synonymous with the growth and recognition of the modern Australian wine industry, and the Barossa Valley in particular.

For his contribution to the Australian wine industry he was created Member of the Order of Australia in the inaugural list of Australian Honours, the first Australian wine industry figure to be so recognised.

The eminent wine writer James Halliday, in an article wrote about Peter “It’s not often a person becomes a legend in their own lifetime.”

And he is indeed a legend of the Australian wine industry and is referred to warmly as ‘The Baron of Barossa’. He has championed the Barossa Valley as Australia’s leading wine producing region for decades and is accepted as one of the industry’s most respected figures.

A fifth generation Barossan, he was born at Angaston in 1930, the son of a Lutheran pastor. His winemaking career began in 1947 as a 17 year-old with Yalumba where he worked under the mentorship and tutelage of the great Rudi Kronberger for 13 years until he was appointed Winemaker/Manager of Saltram Wines in Angaston. In that role for 20 years he built a national reputation for his high-quality, innovative Barossa wines.

Some of the Shiraz wines he made at Saltram in the 1960s are regarded as among the finest Barossa wines ever produced. They are still perfectly sound and continue to be used by Barossa winemakers to demonstrate the longevity of Barossa Shiraz at its best.

During the Saltram years he took that winery’s production from 400 tonnes to more than 6,000 and was accepted by the independent grape growers who supplied the winery as a man whose word was his bond. There were no written contracts with them – arrangements to buy were made with a handshake.

Australia-wide grape surpluses in 1978 resulted in Saltram’s owners ordering Peter to go back on his word and break his arrangements with his long-established grape suppliers. Characteristically, he refused to do this.

Knowing many growers would face near-ruin if their grapes were left on the vine, and to honour his word, Peter, with the financial support of family and friends, created a new company, Masterson, to buy their grapes. The name Masterson was taken from the Damon Runyon character Sky Masterson, a gambler, and the company logo became the Queen of Clubs, aptly symbolic because Peter was gambling with his career, savings and the investors’ finance. Breathtakingly high stakes!

Peter found investment partners to fund and build a winery in time for the 1980 vintage and they became the principal owners of the company, with Peter as a minority shareholder.

The imminent withdrawal of Peter Lehmann Wines’ principal shareholder in 1993 threatened the company’s survival and Lehmann was again forced to gamble – this time by offering equity in the company by public float. The growers with whom he had forged such lasting relationships and the loyal staff who had followed him from Saltram, invested in the new enterprise together with thousands of small investors and the float succeeded almost overnight.

In the latter part of 2003 he had to roll the dice again. To ward off a hostile takeover by multinational drinks group, Allied Domecq, and he chose the Hess Group as the partner who would most closely fit his aspirations. After another very public battle, Hess succeeded, with Peter Lehmann retaining just over 10% in the company.

Having now retired, a fit and energetic Peter Lehmann lives with his wife Margaret in a house overlooking the vineyards at the winery in Tanunda. These days he argues, with the benefit of hindsight, that what may have appeared as longshot gambles were not gambles at all. “My faith in the Barossa and its people and the potential quality of Barossa wines, and my belief in the wine industry at large has always been with me. I didn’t really see the risks I took as gambles. If they were, they were bloody good ones, after all, we backed 3 winners!”

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Peter
LEHMANN
of the Barossa

The PEOPLE, STORIES & WINES
THAT MAKE *the* BAROSSA FAMOUS