

a GENEROUS GIANT

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When Peter Leon Lehmann stood up in front of 800 wine dignitaries in London late last year to accept the International Wine Challenge Lifetime Achievement Award, he was greeted by thunderous applause and a spontaneous standing ovation—and was deeply moved.

“Quite something, really, isn’t it?” he ponders reverently. “I still wonder if they got the right bloke. No doubt my father would have been astounded too. I was a bit of a ‘messenger’ as a kid and Dad always said that if there was a wrong way of doing something, somehow I’d find it!”

But he did do something right and his stellar career, gargantuan reputation and endearing qualities were aptly acknowledged in this most deservedly earned trophy.

Peter’s dynamic journey of turmoil and triumph has already been well documented by countless vigilant wine scribes: his groundbreaking 12 year apprenticeship at Yalumba; his first solo vintage at Vintners in 1957; the giddy, exhilarating years as chief winemaker at Saltram; the unflinching commitment to his growers following trying drought and poor returns in the mid-1970s and dogged attempts to raise working capital for Masterson Wines in 1979; his daring launch of Peter Lehmann Wines in 1980; the highly successful, largely Barossa-backed 1993 public float; the ongoing battle against prowling multi-nationals and, finally, the current, more culturally comfortable partnership from 2003, with major shareholder, the Hess Group.

As the sun sets over the 63rd vintage for this multi award-winning Barossa treasure and recipient of the Queen’s first Australian Honours in 1975, on the eve of his 80th birthday, it’s time to consider the man behind the legend and share some of his more personal and poignant

stories, which are bedrock to his character, his beliefs, his loves and life.

The Angaston born and bred second product of Lutheran pastor Franz Julius Lehmann’s second marriage to Erna Regina Linke (his first wife died, having borne three offspring, Adeline, Elmor and Desma), Peter grew up with his older brother Kevin and younger sister Josie under the loving watch of his “stern but broadminded and compassionate father and even-tempered, tolerant mother”.

A book’s worth of stories arise from a happy and lively childhood spent roaming the Angaston hills, collecting lizards in paper bags, shooting rabbits with his Daisy air rifle, torturing his younger sister (while scraping away on his fiddle until she paid him 10 bob to stop), hunting and shooting with his father and watching his mother make suet pastry, rabbit pie, homemade pasties and his birthday favourites, steak and kidney pudding and orange cake.

Mischief was never far away.

“I had my first go at father’s pipe when I was five,” says Peter. “I got very crook and gave up smoking for six years then started again when I was 11!”

And it didn’t stop on Sundays.

“My greatest wish as a young boy was that the church would be full on Sunday and there’d be no room for the pastor’s family,” says Peter. “I remember the day my prayers were answered out at Keyneton. The church was packed and ‘Lofty’ (brother, Kevin) and I got busy letting down all the parishioners’ tyres. I did get into a bit of strife though, when I decided to climb up the church tower and stir up the unsuspecting congregation by ringing the church bell in the middle of the service!”

Further down the track, there were the mandatory Saturday night dances. The 17-year-old apprentice, with an allowance of two flagons a





From left: Peter Lehmann (with Hollywood's Sam Neill) as guest judge for the International Wine and Food Society in Hong Kong; PL and Ian Doyle on one of many fishing adventures; French horn player, Barry "Dear Boy" Tuckwell entertains PL with an impromptu performance at the Barossa Music Festival; Peter gets into a spot of trouble during one of many Outback escapades.

week of Autumn Brown Sherry and Prince's Port tucked into his kitbag, was always a highly sought-after knock-about mate.

"In those days you couldn't drink within 300 yards of a place of public entertainment, so Willy (Lionel) Winter, 'Rocket' Bouts and I would hop into Les Gabel's courier bus, drive 301 yards and settle down to a few schlucks," laughs Peter.

Humour has always played a valuable role in the generational Lehmann household.

"Mum, ever the dutiful pastor's wife, always dressed well, was slow to anger and not easily shocked or fazed," Peter says. "I only saw her crack once. She sent me down to the butchers to buy some corned beef and I came back with this flabby and fatty monstrosity. She was furious with the butchers and threw the offending meat on the floor and kicked it all around the room from pillar to post. We laughed about that for years!"

His stoic parents felt keenly the impact of world war prejudices and the scrutiny of German-speaking Barossa settler families. His mother vowed and declared her family would not suffer her own humiliation in attending school without a word of English and theirs was one of the few Lutheran families brought up speaking English in the home.

Peter's father was no killjoy either in those dark days. He allowed his children to go to dances, to sneak off to the pictures (considered highly frivolous at the time) and he enjoyed playing bowls.

"I remember when he shocked his fellow clergy by turning up at a Saturday morning Synod council decked out in his creams ready for an afternoon of pennant bowls. They weren't too impressed," chuckles Peter.

Personal trauma arrived early for Peter. He hovered between life and death with severe head injuries at the age of 12 when knocked off his bike by a car in Angaston, and two years later his charismatic father suffered a heart attack and died in his arms, aged 55. A deeply shocked young family shared their father's funeral with 2,000 mourners.

Rescue from a fatherless youth and aimless school life came three years

later when Yalumba Wine Company secretary Alf Wark offered him an apprenticeship. Blessed with a perfect recall of the flavours that trickled across his palate and lateral thinking, the young Lehmann found his calling.

"Three mentors were most significant in my forward thinking," says Peter. "Alf Wark taught me the joys of food, wine, hunting, shooting and fishing; winemaker Rudi Kronberger, a terrific bloke, patience personified, taught me the fundamentals of winemaking and Wyndham Hill Smith taught me the value of a man's honour. I have adopted that philosophy and my word has been my bond ever since."

It was the 1949 Angaston Hospital Ball when the 20-year-old became "smitten" with 27-year-old Annie McCaig Miller. Peter and 'Nan', as she was known, married on 2 June 1951, with a grand reception at the former South Australian Hotel in Adelaide. A busy Barossa life and 18 years of marriage followed, yielding Peter's first family of sons, Doug and Bruce and daughter Libby.

But fate was to play its own trump card and destiny decreed another life partner. He met Margaret Penny, the irresistibly bright educator, consummate communicator and daughter of the principal of Adelaide Teachers College, H.H. Penny, and they married quietly in Adelaide in August 1970.

Later they welcomed their two sons, David in 1972 and Philip in 1974, but right from the start, Peter enfolded his savvy spouse into his world at Saltram, crushers and all. For 40 years it has been a dynamic, electric partnership which continues to etch its own place in Barossa culture and history.

"Fuelled by lust," Peter jokes.

"And shared values, mutual respect and barrel loads of laughter," Margaret adds.

It's an intoxicating mix by anyone's standards.

"I always found Peter's special quality as a giver, rather than a taker, extraordinarily attractive," says Margaret. "He's never lived by a business plan—he simply gives for the pleasure of giving, not for personal or commercial gain."

Peter's mates (enough for two lifetimes) would wholeheartedly agree. Sadly, so many have gone with the passing of years, but for the multitude who remain, Peter's covert philanthropy for friends, family and humanitarian causes is a core value.

Retired physician and mate for more than 40 years, John Rutter knows Peter better than most. "Peter has survived three or four life-threatening illnesses and on many occasions I've thought, he won't last until tomorrow," confides John. "Through all his worrying health crises I don't think I have ever heard him complain once. There's never been a 'why me?'."



"With Peter, what you see is what you get. But underneath the rough exterior and deadpan one-liners lies kindness and generosity beyond the ordinary."

A keen punter in his day, Peter always kept a spare quid in his pocket—sometimes even in his shoe!

"A group of us headed down to the Gawler Trots one Wednesday night—PL, Bill Truscott, Brian Linke and Norton Schluter to name a few," John smiles. "PL says to all of us: 'I've got this horse that's going to win. If it gets away well, it's a sure thing'. So we all plonked our money on it even though on 60 percent of occasions the horse had never got away. Standing directly below the judge's box, all of us anxious at the start, they let go of the elastic band stretched across the track to start the race. The horse didn't move an inch.

"At the top of his voice Lehmann yells out: 'False start!'. The startled judge instinctively pressed the red button to stop the race... and the horse went on to win! That's life with Lehmann," laughs John.

The cross-country Outback escapades in Peter's trusty VLT550 Nissan Patrol with old mates Graham Keightley and Dick Thornbury hold holy trail status and a well-travelled, heavily marked road atlas is proud testimony of a bevy of boys' annual adventures and hi-jinks. No doubt what happens on the road stays on the road, but tales have been filtering back of a plucky Peter driving bemused buddies headlong into washouts and bone-crunching potholes, bogging them for hours. The same driver was also spotted having four failed attempts at mounting Big Red, a famous sandhill just out of Birdsville. When it was pointed out to him he was only in two wheel drive he cursed, slammed it into four wheel drive, flew up the hill and went clean over the top.

But special too, have been the memorable, 'smoking encouraged' Ford Maverick road trips with Margaret through the McDonnell Ranges, the Kimberleys and the Nullarbor. With ABC FM permanently locked in, like escaped convicts they blazed their way around the rugged terrain of Australia

(frequently on unbeaten but infinitely more interesting tracks), embracing the simple enjoyment that came from playing hookey from public life.

Lehmann hospitality has become folklore. The decades of home entertaining, often hosting famous artists and musicians at their kitchen table and their winery's support for countless Vintage Festivals and Barossa Music Festivals is now recalled in bulging photo albums and walls crammed with memorabilia—a cherished and fitting record of an extended family which stretches to every corner of the world.

A pioneering community leader, Peter has rolled up his sleeves for the Angaston Lawn Bowling Club, Angaston Kindergarten and Kalimna Golf Club (which he helped build), played a vigorous role in the Junior Chamber of Commerce, worked diligently to establish free-thinking Barossa public libraries (in the days when Enid Blyton and cowboy books were banned), supported countless community projects and sat on committees when his winery commitments permitted.

Whether playing cricket or football, golfing, fishing, camping, rifle shooting, bowling, punting, reading (everything), cooking game pies or choosing with care a special bottle for a 'Wednesday table' lunch with mates, he has been and remains 'standout company' to so many.

But it's been a learning experience along the way. Long time friend Norton Schluter will take one memory with him to his grave.

"PL was playing in a local football match," says Norton. "One point behind, we needed a point to draw or a goal to win by five points. Peter gets a free right in front, in the goal square. He aims and kicks and the ball goes out of bounds."

"It was wet and muddy—I slipped!" splutters Peter.

"I'll never forgive you, Lehmann," shrieks Norton. Relenting later, "Oh all right then, maybe when I die, I'll have it put on my gravestone, 'I forgive you, Peter'."

Ask Peter what motto he'd have inscribed on his gravestone, and the answer flashes back, quick as lightning.

"The most unforgivable sin is being caught. It covers a lot of territory," he chuckles wryly.

Ask Peter the secret to his successful marriage and the banter really warms up. "We enjoy each other's company," says Margaret.

"War keeps us together!" mutters Peter, poker-faced. "Pick up a pack of cards and she beats the shit out of me! Crib, Coon Can—you name it. We played chess for a while, but she couldn't win, so we gave it up."

Yet ask who he attributes his success to, and the joking, for the moment, is over.

"The most significant factor relating to any success and achievements we've had are largely due to Margaret," Peter says firmly. "None of it would have happened without her. She discovered qualities in me I didn't know I possessed. I'd hidden parts of myself because of the whole trauma of being of Germanic origin. I was ashamed of my heritage for a long period because we were almost made to feel like the enemy for a long



time. I'm now ashamed of being ashamed. I have always loved classical music, but as a listener, not a player, and I was always too afraid to enjoy the arts, for fear of being labelled a sissy. Margaret has changed all that."

As a long interview draws to a close, Peter draws: "You've asked me just about everything but my inside trouser leg measurement!" Nevertheless, talking up close and personal with PL is simply a privilege.

Like Arthur and Camelot, the legend of Peter and his Barossa lives on, not least because his intelligence, searing honesty and razor-sharp wit knows no boundaries. When on 18 August 2010 this generous giant starts his ninth decade there may not be 800 revellers. But odds on there will be music, there will be laughter and the wine in the glass will be 'Margaret'. **bl**