

A Nichols Worth of Wine
December 2007

In The Vineyard



Rarely, maybe once in a lifetime, do you have the occasion to meet or learn of a giant among men. I was fortunate to have worked for one, Charlie Cawley, of MBNA America, the preeminent credit card company of its time. Recently, at a masterly prepared wine trade luncheon at the Naples Beach and Golf Club, I learned of another "bigger than life" figure, Aussie wine legend, Peter Lehmann. Ultimately, what drew me to comparing these visionaries of vastly disparate industries was their unwavering belief in and support of the people they employed and did business with.

Peter is a fifth generation Barossan, whose German ancestors migrated to Australia in the mid 19th century. The son of a Lutheran pastor, and now retired, Peter embarked on his wine career in 1947 at Yalumba. Fame, if not fortune, came decades later as winemaker at Saltram, then a premier Australian winery. In the late 1970's, Mother Nature delivered a streak of successive vintages of drought that drove Saltram to cancel long standing contracts with its grape growing farmers. Peter, unhappy about such corporate financial decisions, left Saltram, reassuring his farmer friends that he would honor their (Saltram) agreements and started his own wine operation. The rest, as they say, is history.

The wine environment in Australia was imploding in 1979 with the Australian government paying grape farmers to plow under their crops. Saltram abruptly stopped buying grapes and virtually overnight, the Australian wine industry was on its proverbial deathbed. Peter Lehmann was on his own, farmers were wondering where the next paycheck was coming from, and a growing Aussie wine-buying public, having just grown accustomed to great Australian-made wines, were left with little inventory, dubious quality and a diminishing selection of native wines to choose from.

In 1980, with little more than the deep conviction that Australia's Barossa Valley was capable of producing world-class wine, Peter set out to put his beloved birthplace back on the world wine map. To say the early years at the winery were challenging is a gross understatement, but Peter managed to weather those financial struggles and create a spectacular wine with his first vintage in 1980. The wine (naturally a shiraz) was made with grapes from the very growers Peter promised to support. Twenty seven years later, that wine is still drinking well. Quite surprising, since at the time, funds were so scarce "PL" couldn't afford the oak barrels to age his wines in.

Today, the Peter Lehmann winery, managed by his son, Doug, continues to support 185 Barossa grape growers and control almost a quarter of the harvested grapes from more than 900 individual vineyards in the region. Many of these farmers still have the exclusive contracts forged back in 1979 when Peter boldly started out on his own. Earlier in this decade, when consolidation escalated in the wine industry, Peter successfully fought off a buy-out by conglomerate, Allied Domecq, agreeing instead to be purchased in 2003 by the California based Hess Group for \$103 million dollars. With Hess's capital infusion, the winery has grown to an annual production of 600,000 cases. America now buys just over ten percent of the dozen or so different Lehmann varietals that the winery produces, focused primarily on reds of incredible richness and balance.

Barossa Valley, forty miles northeast of Adelaide in South Australia, is often referred to as the Southern Hemisphere's Napa Valley. Contrary to its name, the "valley" has vineyards that are up to 1000 feet above sea level, but it is still hotter and flatter there than many adjoining grape growing regions. For decades, drought has become the norm in Australia, with the government imposing severe restrictions on crop irrigation, including grapes. Many vineyards in Barossa are dry-farmed, meaning they may receive no water for months at a time. Old vines, some of which were planted back in the 1840's, when grape growers of German descent migrated to the area, actually thrive on the little to no rain and the not uncommon 100 degree heat in the Barossa.

The weather, soil and the sought-after style of big, jammy shiraz fruit flavors, have all established the type of wine that has made Australia (and the Barossa Valley in particular) incredibly popular. Australia, is now the sixth largest wine producing country in the world, thanks in large part to Peter Lehmann's passion for and commitment to the Barossa Valley. Lehmann's portfolio of award winning wines, with their artist series labels - look for the trademark *Queen of Clubs* representing the huge gamble Peter took starting a winery at a time when the industry was on the verge of collapse - continues to grow with the recent introduction of individual vineyard designate wines. It is the Lehmann shiraz, in particular the "*Stonewall*" and "*Eight Songs*" that have captured the attention of American wine drinkers, but the cabernets and especially, the riesling from neighboring Eden Valley, are outstanding varietals that should not be missed. On the lower-priced value side, is *Clancy's Red*, a delicious blend of shiraz, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc.

Peter Lehmann wines are widely available in wine stores and on the wine lists of Naples's better restaurants, including the newly re-opened Bay House in North Naples.

Did you know....

The Aussie wine industry is expected to have a record low crop in 2008, forcing some wine companies to source grapes from as far away as South America and South Africa.

Around Town

There are times when writing about wine isn't as easy as you would think, especially when a story turns out to be a bit controversial. After ranting last month about consolidation in the wine industry, I thought I had put that issue behind me, at least for a while. Then the buzz around town about *Total Wine*, the Delaware-based wine retail chain with forty nine stores, opening in the Carillon Shopping Center, grew to a very loud roar. You would have thought they came to Naples to give wine away, which in a way, they are.

Rumors about this *Walmart of Wine Stores*, began surfacing more than a year ago but for the most part were dismissed because conventional wisdom was that we have more



than our fair share of places to buy wine in Naples. The fact they were supposedly looking along the Pine Ridge/Airport Pulling Rd corridor made the idea even more preposterous. Or did it? Sure you have Haskell's, with its knowledgeable service (and a very good selection), and who can complain about Costco, with their incredible slim margins that are passed on to the customer. But you have to know what you're buying, because finding someone at Costco to answer a question about your wine purchase isn't easy. So why would *Total Wine* choose to come to Naples,

especially to an area of town where there is already a specialty store with selection and service and another with incredible prices? Hmm... could it be because there are a lot of wine buyers in Naples? Absolutely!

My wine writing "*niche*", if you will, has always been about finding value for my readers. Going out and locating the best wines at the best price and trying to tell a story about the people and places behind those wines is what I attempt to do. You would think that *Total Wine*, or anyone bringing wine into the local market at deeply discounted prices, would be cause for celebration. And maybe it is. But I think we need to look beyond the extra buck or two we might save shopping there and consider the potential impact when a wine Goliath comes to town. Can the "Davids" of this story survive?

One only has to walk Fifth Avenue to realize what's happening to the "little guy", the *Mom and Pop* stores. A number of small businesses on Fifth and around town have closed in the past year and more are grumbling that escalating rents and competition from an oversupply of new shopping centers may soon force them out. It is very, very difficult for locally owned shopkeepers to survive when big stores, with big pockets and Madison Avenue marketing instincts, invade a small town. So, will *Total Wine's* arrival benefit the local wine buyer and community at large? I set out just before Thanksgiving in an attempt to answer that question.

The first visit was a “shock and awe”, exhausting experience. It took me 90 minutes to get up and down the aisles and that was just the wine. The place is huge, bigger, I think than ABC, the other wine factory in town. To *Total Wine's* credit, the store is well-organized and there are a number of “bargains”; wines clearly priced to attract customers and worry the competition. And worry they should. Maybe we all need to be concerned what happens when one company prices their products at seemingly unprofitable margins for a short time and that “marketing strategy” triggers the breaking point for the small, independent merchants in our town.

So I view it as somewhat of a mixed blessing that a giant like *Total Wine* opened here in Naples. Occasionally I still buy wine from *Costco* and on a second trip back to *Total Wine*, I did buy three wines. But I made it a point to select wines that I felt reasonably certain were not on the shelves of the small, local merchants where I generally shop. Isn't buying wine supposed to be at least a little about the personal experience? Are our lives so busy, our finances so stretched, that we can't spend a little more time and an extra dollar shopping for a wine sold with a dose of passion and maybe a story about the winemaker or where and how it was made? Buying wine should be enjoyable!

I'll continue to seek out and write about the value wines, those bargains in the marketplace, and inevitably some will continue to come from the big-box wine stores, but please let's not forget the “little guy”. They deserve at least some of our business.

If you like Thai food and *Sushi Thai*, then you here before the season reservations become two locations in North original at 103rd Street), also gives you an opportunity to taste why recommend pairing spicy Asian food. *Sushi*



haven't already tried owe it to yourself to get is in full session and near impossible. With Naples (I prefer the dining at *Sushi Thai* excellent, inexpensive wine educators often gurwurztraminer with *Thai* offers a Columbia

Crest Gerwurtraminer at the incredible price of \$15 for the bottle! That is often the cost of a glass of wine in other local sushi restaurants. This is a great match!

According to a good friend who spent time in Thailand with the State Department, the food is authentic. Many of the dishes are offered in four levels of heat including “*Thai Hot*”. I love the *Tom Yum* soup with either chicken or shrimp prepared at this incendiary level and if you choose to order it this way, bring plenty of tissues; this soup is guaranteed to open up your sinuses. The sushi and sashimi is excellent, the prices reasonable, and the staff, who I think are mostly all Thai, are incredibly friendly and efficient. For directions and reservations, call the 103rd Street restaurant at 592-7575.