

Original 1934 vintage

Now approaching his 80th year Wolf Blass, the man who did so much to put our wine on the world map, is still bursting with opinions about sport, politics, horseracing and, yes, the Barossa.

Age is supposed to mellow people, but the passing of the years seems to have had the opposite effect on Wolfgang Fritz Otto Blass, the man who created Australia's most ubiquitous wine brand. At 78 Wolf Blass is still wearing his trademark bow ties and still firing on all turbo-driven cylinders – talking to Wolf is like being fed into a human combine harvester churning out a constant stream of ideas, opinions and bravado.

“I’m a ’34 vintage,” he laughs. “And still going strong.”

The story of Wolf Blass Wines is really the story of Blass himself – the bright, if slightly mischievous German boy who fled the rubble and destruction of post-war Europe for first Britain and then South Australia, turning a small piggery in the Barossa into a global wine colossus. In a period of 11 years the company's net worth grew from \$177,300 to over \$15m. Wolf Blass became a major player on the Australian wine scene, first changing drinking patterns at home and then taking on the world.

His biographer Liz Johnston believes that Wolf was not only a man of enormous energy and ambition, he was the first winemaker in Australia to realise the potential of easy-drinking table wine. “It was not fully appreciated in some quarters that Wolf turned the industry around from a small exclusive club to a mass market,” she writes.

Following the sale of Mildara Blass for \$560m in 1996 to Foster's, Blass withdrew from day-to-day involvement with the winery which bears his name, but remains a brand ambassador with Treasury Wines, following the wine division's demerger from Foster's in May 2011.

In between travelling the world for Treasury, running the Wolf Blass Foundation and becoming a property developer (he has built a number of supermarkets in Adelaide) Blass likes nothing more than weighing into the political minefield of Australian wine.

The German-born winemaker is currently raging against the influence of the supermarkets in setting wine prices and the policy of dumping cheap Australian wine onto the international market – two policies which he believes are harming the country's image as a producer of premium table wine.

“This cheap wine is being sent in bulk to Europe and sold under the title ‘wine of south-east Australia’ which undermines what we've been doing all these years,” he says. “I understand why people do it, even we send some bulk wine this way, but I don't agree with the policy.”

Not that Blass is a stranger to controversy. He has been treading on toes almost from the day he stepped down from the plane in 1961 to become the manager of sparkling wines at Kaiser Stuhl. “I thought I had arrived in hell,” he says, recalling his first sight of Darwin. Despite his

early misgivings about Australia, Wolf thrived at Kaiser Stuhl, producing a range of sweet sparkling wine such as the infamous Cold Duck, Yalumba Pearlette and Pineapple Pearl. A few years later Blass started his own business, which he modestly called Wolf Blass Wines International, but soon ran into problems with the local grape growers. According to Wolf a group of local growers once set fire to an effigy of the him on a bonfire they'd constructed outside his office in Hindmarsh Square following a heated dispute over grape prices. “Those bloody bastards,” he says. “Talk about being burnt at the stake. At that stage I didn't own any vineyards, so they thought they had me over a barrel. That's why I began buying my own vineyards.”

Forty years later and Blass is still raging against what he calls the “conservative” forces in the Barossa. “I think ‘conservative’ is putting it kindly,” he says. This time the dispute is over the future location of his proposed National Wine Museum of Australia. Blass has been negotiating with the Barossa Council over the use of the Angaston town hall, but the talks have hit an impasse. Blass, who is prepared to put \$500,000 into the project, is now looking at alternatives in Adelaide and the Eastern States.

“It's now sitting in boxes at the Wolf Blass Wine Centre,” he says, sounding dejected.

Celebrated as much for his marketing skills as for his ability as a winemaker (Wolf Blass was the first person to display gold medals on Australian wine bottles and pioneered sports sponsorship, pouring money into local football and horseracing) he is equally vocal about the current state of wine and tourism in the Barossa.

“The problem is the mentality of the people, who isolate themselves town by town,” he says. “We need a united front between the tourism, business, grapegrowers and the winemakers so that they can all make one decision.”

Blass believes that the Barossa, despite being the largest wine-producing region in Australia, is falling behind places like Margaret River, the Hunter Valley and McLaren Vale which offer much more for visitors to do.

“I stopped in Nuriootpa to buy a pie the other day and the place was dead,” he complains.

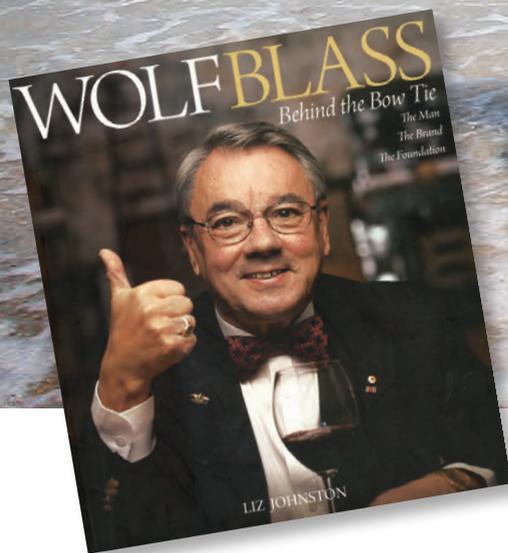
Not that Blass believes that the Barossa is doomed. He singles out fellow winemakers Grant Burge, Peter Lehmann and Robert Hill Smith for praise – lamenting the fact that their contribution is not valued enough.

“I'm very pleased to see that Robert Hill Smith is now vice president of the [WineMakers'] federation,” he says. “Yalumba is one of the best run family wine companies in Australia. It's done more good for the Barossa than anyone else.”



Not a vineyard in sight ... Wolf Blass on the beach with his son Anton. The wine mogul is now running a number of business ventures, including commercial property development in Adelaide.

Photo courtesy of newspix.



As a master marketer who created the famous Eaglehawk logo (knitting together his Australian and German roots), Blass believes that the region should be making much more of the Barossa brand, both for domestic and international consumers.

“We need some emblem to represent the Barossa and the words ‘Barossa Valley’ should be spelt out [on wine bottles] like many other wine regions like Margaret River or Marlborough,” he says.

The legendary wine critic James Halliday once said that no one had a better antennae for picking future consumer trends in wine than Wolf Blass. He was, after all, the first person in Australia to target the young female market. In the 1970s he made headlines with the boast: “My wines make weak men strong and strong women weak!”

Gazing into his crystal ball, the flamboyant winemaker says that Australia’s future lies in wooing the rising Chinese middle class (and other wealthy consumers in South-East Asia) rather than planting obscure grape varieties, which only confuse the marketplace.

“We should stick to the best grape variety in each region,” he says. “For the Clare it’s Riesling and for the Barossa it’s probably Shiraz. To make all these innovative Spanish and Italian styles is a marketing tool so that you can get your wines into restaurants and half of them don’t even taste

very nice. Not to me.” Blass also argues that the state government should abandon its plans to turn South Australia into a mining state and spend more resources improving the wine regions, such as the Barossa. Chinese investors should be welcomed with open arms, not treated with suspicion.

“I love the bloody Chinese. I think they’re great characters and don’t forget Adelaide would not be in such a comfortable situation without the presence of so many Asian students.”

A prodigious clubman – his autobiography lists 21 of them, including shooting, sailing, horse-racing and AFL associations – Blass remains active and highly visible on the South Australian scene.

Due to health problems he’s had to abandon his annual skiing holidays in the Victorian alps (“too bloody old,” he snorts), but it’s unlikely that he’ll ever give up his favourite hobby – getting up people’s noses.

His earliest memories are as young boy trying to survive among the rubble and corpses as the Allies advanced into Nazi Germany. “As a kid in a war zone you become a street fighter,” he once said. “The survival kit is built into you.” He’s still fighting. **bl**

Wolf Blass: Behind the Bow Tie (Fairfax Books, \$39.99) by Liz Johnston is available at all good book shops.