The Wine Committee of the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria (RASV) is in charge of the running of The Royal Melbourne Wine Show which is, by any measure, a large and successful wine show. What are its credentials? The RASV has been running exhibitions and competitions for agricultural pursuits for more than 130 years and no doubt wine samples were part of the very earliest exhibits. At this time Victoria was the predominant wine producing area of Australia, even earning the sobriquet of ‘John Bulls Vineyard.’

The first recording of a wine competition in the society’s history book Speed the Plough was in the year 1903. First prize of £100 and second of £50 were awarded in classes for ‘farm, dairy, horticulture, wool, wine, root crops, minerals and wood’, an eclectic gathering. The current format of the Royal Melbourne Wine Show dates from the 1930s and 1940s and was established by such wine notables as Tom Seabrook, W. W. Senior and George Fairbrother. It has been expanded and refined in line with the changing requirements of the wine industry. Today the show receives some 4,000 entries from about 470 exhibitors. These are to be judged by five panels of three senior judges assisted by around 40 paid and volunteer staff including associate judges, stewards, clerks, pencillers, et al.

In the late ’60s a Federal Council wine committee, under the chairmanship of Colin Haselgrove, attempted over three years to develop a uniform schedule and set of regulations for Australian wine shows. After these had been agreed by the Federal Council, they were to be adopted by all the major shows in Australia. The uniformity lasted about one year, but ended when Sydney went one way and Adelaide went another.

The Royal Melbourne Wine Show divides into three distinct activities as far as the committee is concerned, with an overall annual budget of about $350,000. The first is the competition itself, the second is the wine awards dinner and the third is the matter of sponsorship. The competition is meant to be self-funding and includes such activities as underwriting (together with the Victorian Wine Industry Association (VWIA)) the visit to Melbourne of an international judge. The dinner is also meant to be self-funding after providing entree for sponsors, trophy donors, judging panels and so on. The committee sells sponsorship of the Royal Melbourne Wine Show and this provides the return on investment expected by the RASV for the use of facilities and ‘know-how’. The committee’s budget is not all the input to the worth of the Royal Melbourne Wine Show. Exhibiting winemakers make a huge contribution through the samples provided for assessment. With 4,000 entries and at least four bottles for each, the cost to the exhibitor is plenty.

The other significant input, which is impossible to quantify, is the volunteer contribution. These volunteers hail from the wine industry, from industries associated with the wine industry, from among wine ‘amateurs’ and from students of the hospitality industry. Of the 55 people involved with making the wine show a success, only some eight are paid staff of the RASV. The committee is extremely grateful to those who give so freely of their time and expertise. Today it is not necessary to debate the philosophy of the wine show system, nor how shows contribute to the success of the industry of which we are all so proud. This paper seeks to highlight the problems and opportunities for the RASV, and to demonstrate that they are closely related to the reasons for conducting this seminar. These are some of the issues the committee is grappling with.

Facilities
This refers to the physical facilities on the showgrounds. Showground buildings tend to be erected for purposes other than housing wine judging, such as trade exhibits, animal rings, sideshows, rock concerts, etc. The RASV has had on the drawing board for many years the ideal design for a purpose-built facility. Air-conditioned, full of indirect light, free from off-odours, warm and soft under-foot, with racking for 1,500 dozen bottles, modern glass-washing machines and judging benches for 400 wines at a time for 15 judges and 15 associate judges, not to mention computer terminals and communication facilities. The RASV is trying to make it happen with support from the Victorian State Government, but in the meantime must do its best with the P.B. Ronald Pavilion. This year once again the pavilion has been rearranged and the new layout, together with changed procedures, has given a few more years’ breathing space. What is known however is that The Royal Melbourne Wine Show is nearing the limit of its physical capacity, for as the wine industry continues its rapid growth more and more wine-makers want to exhibit. The RASV must do all it can to retain the integrity of the wine show.

Entry schedule
For the last 20 years the schedule of classes, quantities, conditions and wine definitions have continued to change and evolve. The main engine of change is consultation with the winemakers, which means for the committee the VWIA. The wine show committee has a formal meeting with the VWIA technical committee soon after the wine show each year and exchanges letters of suggestions and recommendations for change. Also on the committee are two former chairmen of the VWIA and a member of their executive, as well as two former presidents of the national wine industry body. The wine show committee tries very hard to ensure that the schedule aligns with current industry thinking, which is another reason it has welcomed the ASVO proposal for this seminar.
In more recent years a number of changes have been aimed at stabilising the number of entries. This year the show has incorporated the classes for Victorian wines into appropriate open classes for judging, relying on the magic of the computer age to identify entries worthy of receiving trophies relevant to Victorian winemakers. However, the committee is running out of ideas on how to keep the number entries within the show’s competence. Serious suggestions are needed from this seminar.

It is clear that other major wine shows also appear to be grappling with the matter of rapidly increasing entries. It is rumoured that Sydney’s huge increase in entry fees two years ago was an attempt to apply price control on numbers. This did not seem to work, but it did appear to make a lot of money.

Adelaide went the price point/labelled bottles route. It is not known if Adelaide’s objective was achieved, but it certainly made it easier to conduct public tasting.

**Panel of judges**

A condition applying to all competitions conducted by the RASV is that no exhibitor is to be a judge in the section they have entered. This restriction does not apply to associate judges or stewards who participate in the wine show for training and for the experience, as well as for providing numerous pairs of hands. The panel of senior judges is of high calibre and has been for many years. A list of this year’s judges appears below:

Bill Chambers (Chairman of judges)
Gary Baldwin
Nick Bulleid
Darryl Beeson (USA)
Andrew Corrigan
John Ellis
Mike Farmilo
Steve Guy
Ray Healey
Chris Killeen
Chris Pfeiffer
Randall Pollard
Ben Riggs
Peter Scudamore-Smith
Tony Royal
Tim White

The judges are unpaid, but do receive travel reimbursements. They are provided with accommodation in the city environs and travel to and from the showgrounds (arriving at 8 am and departing around 5 pm for four and a half days including a week-end—not for the faint hearted). Recently there have been discussions amongst the show societies about remuneration for judges. This, amongst other issues, raises matters such as PAYG tax and compulsory superannuation. To this time it has been felt that proper reimbursement of expenses is a more comfortable route. It is not an easy task to put together each year a panel of willing and able judges. The wine industry itself has a responsibility to provide training to potential wine judges, and the committee congratulates the AWRI and Adelaide University for their initiatives in this matter.

**Is it a competition or an exhibition?**

The RASV has always taken the view that the show is both. James Halliday has been a supporter of the view that ‘the show system should be about improvement of the breed’ and to that end the committee has always encouraged entries in classes for new vintage wines and for one year-old wines still undergoing bulk maturation. These classes seem of particular relevance to red wines and fortified wines, white, red and muscats. It is said that results in these classes are not relevant to ‘customers’, which begs the question of who these might be. It is worth remembering that for maybe a third of each new vintage, the customer is another winemaker, since trading between wine companies has always been an important feature of the Australian industry. This is also a feature of other world wine areas, although the trade in young wines tends to be more towards the shippers and wholesalers (and these days the huge retailers as well). This is where the Jimmy Watson Memorial Trophy had its origins.

Jimmy Watson, together with others such as Seabrooks, Rhinecastle and Harry Brown, bought one year-old dry red for bottling and marketing under their own labels and for distribution through their outlets. The RASV does not claim to have made the Jimmy Watson famous in the public domain. Most of those attending the seminar are responsible for having created the public’s perception that the Jimmy Watson is the most important trophy in the Melbourne Wine Show. The committee understands, as does the industry, that it is a winemaker’s trophy. However it also understands that all publicity is good, and is thus resigned to the media hype, good and bad, that accompanies the award of the trophy each year.

Why does the show award medals for so-called ‘unfinished wine’? (One point of view is that a red wine in bottle is still ‘unfinished’ until the cork is pulled, even if that event is 10 or 20 years down the track. All accept that the great Muscats from the northeast are still in cask). Melbourne Wine Show gives medals in bulk wine classes for the same reason that junior athletes receive gold, silver and bronze in under-age competitions. They are the best in their class at the time.

Richard Haselgrove concluded his paper with the following remarks.

‘I thank the committee of the Australian Society for Viticulture and Oenology (of which I think I was a founding member) for the opportunity of presenting to you today. I look forward with interest to the remaining contributions and the discussions today and in the months ahead. We don’t need to re-invent the wheel, but we do need a more streamlined show system to cope with a rapidly expanding wine industry, which will serve us well into this new century.’

**Reference**

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