The Cowra Wine Show does not consider itself a regional wine show or a national wine show, rather it exists to service the Australian wine industry as a whole. To do this it has not limited itself, and aims to service big and small producers, new and established companies, and both the top and bottom end of the quality spectrum. Although the producer/marketeer-cum-exhibitor is the primary customer, increasing recognition of a Cowra Wine Show award in the domestic market demands that relevance and integrity be retained to the consumer also.

The Cowra Show Society is an integral part of the agricultural society system. The show has evolved through the encouragement and guidance of the Royal National Canberra Agricultural Society (RNCAS), National Wine Show of Australia (with particular input from its chairman, Bill Moore), and now has strong links with the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW, Sydney Wine Show. Equally the show has provided advice and encouragement to smaller regional wine shows that have recently evolved in Cowra, Forbes and Bathurst.

The Cowra Wine Show commenced in 1983 to create a focus for an emerging local industry and promote improvement, education and debate within the industry at large.

The 2001 Cowra Wine Show judged in the last week of July was therefore the 19th. The show attracted 2,400 entries from 318 exhibitors covering all states and the ACT. A chief judge and five panels, each incorporating three judges and one associate judge, worked over three days judging an average of 160 wines per panel per day.

The schedule is designed to encourage all segments of the Australian wine industry to enter. The low quantity entry requirement, minimal restrictions and a low entry fee ($20 + GST), effectively casts a wide net and allows the industry to decide what is relevant.

The 2001 Schedule consisted of three distinct sections:

- Sample classes (lab. or tank, comments and points only = 240 entries).
- Industry classes (bottled, comments and medals only = 720 entries).
- Retail classes (labelled and on sale, comments and medals and trophies = 1440 entries).

Cowra has a number of assets that enhance its ability to run a successful wine show:

- Outstanding community support which allows the job to be done in an efficient and effective manner, whilst keeping the cost to exhibitors at an acceptable level.
- An enthusiastic, young and progressive local industry which provides constant encouragement and feedback.
- Access and credibility in the greater Sydney and Canberra marketplace, enabling successful exhibitors to gain advantage, and ensuring the public tasting is well attended and profitable. One thousand committed consumers support this event annually.

The strength of the Cowra Wine Show lies in a committee willing to maintain independence and integrity, whilst responding to positive industry suggestions. At Cowra the committee members organise and work at the show, providing direct contact and maintaining focus with exhibitors and judges. The committee is pleased with the results and stands by the quality of judging. In the last decade Jim Brayne, Iain Riggs, Tim James and now Geoff Merrill have undertaken the chief judge’s duties and their credentials need no apology. Equally, the panel chairs are experienced national judges. Feedback from judges and exhibitors alike suggest there remains strong industry demand for the show’s services.

The Cowra Wine Show owes its development to:

- The timing of the show in the industry calendar;
- High quality judges with a mix of youth and experience;
- Increasing demand from a rapidly growing industry;
- A simple and responsive schedule;
- Helpful attitude to new, inexperienced exhibitors; and
- Good value for money.

Whilst relatively comfortable with the current situation, the committee does have a number of ongoing concerns, namely:

- Retaining high quality judges in the face of time constraints;
- Restricting entry costs for exhibitors;
- Guaranteeing the integrity of entries and how results are utilised; and
- The lack of communication between wine shows generally.

Cowra intend to respond to these concerns by:

- Retaining high quality judges by remaining relevant and ensuring that they individually benefit from the experience;
- Improving the service to the exhibitors by – better feedback
  – better promotion of results
  – testing better judging systems (i.e. information / bench marking);
- Implementing an auditing system; and
- Supporting improved communication both between wine shows and with industry.

The opportunity was taken on behalf of the Cowra Wine Show committee to suggest improvements to the overall
wine show structure that may assist in achieving some of these goals, namely:

- The creation of a governing body within the agricultural society system to improve communication, both between shows and with the existing Australian wine industry bodies. It is hoped that this body would immediately consider creating a national auditing system and the development of a database of judges for all to use. Potentially, an effective governing body could also lead to a national accreditation process for all Australian wine shows.

- Promoting the National Wine Show of Australia to be the ‘Exhibition of Excellence’ in the Australian wine industry. This would be easily achieved by deleting all but premium and museum classes and forgetting about New Zealand wines. The national show should only accept gold medal winning wines sourced from any credible Australian wine show. For a National Show to remain relevant, it must remain relatively small in entry number so judging quality is maximised. It should be a showcase of the ‘best of the best’ that Australia has to offer.

- Encouraging capital city shows to tighten schedules (i.e. only bottled product) and be seen as a second tier of excellence below the national show. This would maintain relevance to the marketplace.

- The creation of a rigid auditing process. The prestige of the awards from capital city shows already exists, but the integrity of the system needs to be assured if this is to remain.

- Allowing service shows whether they are national, state or boutique focused (i.e. Cowra, Seymour or Stanthorpe) to continue to individually respond to the needs of the entire industry, whether big or small, high or low quality. These shows also have the ability to be very effective educational venues by providing the ideal environment for the personal development of emerging judges. This educational theme would be further promoted by providing constructive and useful feedback direct to the exhibitor. The show’s ability to work with the lower quality producers and effectively lift overall industry standards should not be underestimated.

- Continuing to encourage regional shows involving individual GIC regions so as to maximise the focus on the relative strengths and weaknesses of a particular soil / climate interaction. There seems no apparent reason to attempt to limit the number of such shows as long as the standard of judging is maintained, and the awards retain relativity with other shows.

In summary:

- The Cowra Wine Show is not suggested as a model. It works now and the mix is constantly changing.

- Cowra simply aims to meet current demand and intends to strive to service the whole spectrum of the Australian wine industry.

- Cowra seeks continual improvement through innovation, communication and co-operation.

- Cowra wishes to remain a part of the Australian wine industry.

The Australian wine industry should avoid the temptation to dictate and potentially move towards a tightly structured system that would eventually stymie innovation and progress. Alternatively, the industry should seek to encourage improvements within the wine show system through increased co-operation and communication. The ASVO seminar is an excellent start to this process.