Brian Stonier began his presentation as follows: ‘As a speaker for small company exhibitors, I represent the most numerous class of exhibitor, the one with most to gain from a good show system, and I suspect the stakeholders most to blame for the widely agreed problems of the present system.

I believe my electorate is wine producers who are not one of the 50 big producers who produce more than 100,000 cases, or are non-exhibitors, so that represents, I estimate, at least 1,000 producers out of today’s total of 1,318. We also know 1,030 are small producers (companies of individuals) crushing less than 250 tonnes.

I have of course no mandate to speak for this class, but then neither has anybody else, but if the hypothesis which I shall expound in a moment is right, then we will need a consensus of the smaller producers’ approach to wine shows.

So my answer to the seminar’s title is ‘The Small Exhibitor’ but I don’t think it should be—I think the answer should be ‘The judges should be running the show, and if they’re not, they should be!’

Of all the stakeholders represented today, (show organisers, judges, exhibitors, publicists, retailers, and journalists), the exhibitors are the most important group of beneficiaries, and of this group of beneficiaries, the small exhibitor has most to lose from a failed show system.

The small exhibitor moves over a period of time through a progression of reasons for entering shows: First for his own benefit, to obtain an objective comparison of his wine in relation to other producers; by the best palates available; by judges who instinctively understand his objectives; and by attending exhibitor tastings and talking to judges.

Secondly, for his region’s benefit, based on the belief that great wine can come only from great regions, and that experts will understand a regional style and objective, and the market will take note of a new and emerging wine regional style or variety.

Thirdly, for the consumer’s benefit by winning and promoting widely his medal or trophy wins and using these with full marketing force to draw attention to his winery through media comment and reports on show results.

Fourthly, having achieved success at home, by widening his horizons and entering the (expensive) international shows for his country’s benefit and to increase the ratio of Australian wines that win medals. He may also expect to obtain a marketing edge to be used both at home and in the export market.

He agrees with Doctor A.C. Kelly’s view of 1867: ‘The time has now arrived when the wine growers of the colony must bestir themselves, and boldly face the difficulties before them. They must be prepared to take their stand on ground already occupied by the experienced wine growers of Europe, who have a name, and prestige of centuries, in their favour. We all have a direct interest in each other’s success, for according to the quality of the wines produced for export will be our status as a wine growing country. No petty jealousies need stand in the way of that friendly rivalry to produce the best wine, which ought to be the endeavour of each wine grower.’

The small producer enters the wine shows:

• Believing that all the judges are experienced and skilled at assessing and comparing the class and styles. He does not realise the time commitment of a whole week out of a busy life, or the number of shows currently in Australia (almost one a week) so that often the best people are simply not available, and that at a major show there is almost no chance of discussing his wines with a judge. The number of alleged ‘exhibitors’ at such tastings is ruined both by the recipients of a large number of tickets, who invite their friends, lawyers and doctors, and the short time of the session, chosen so that tickets can also be sold to members of the general public.

• He enters in the belief and expectation that the show is organised ideally for the judges to properly assess each wine and that everyone enters their best wine. He may not realise that judges are required to judge too many wines in a day, suffer from palate fatigue, miss many wines of finesse, and however hard they try, award medals to big blockbuster over-oaked wines at the expense of his subtle wines. He assumes that the wines entered are a typical representation of each winery’s style, and that they have not been specifically made for entering in a show in order to attract the attention of judges and so win a gold medal or trophy. He does not realise that in an exclusively medal-driven company, a winemaker may spend up to six months preparing show samples for specifically medal winning objectives.

• He believes that if he enters all his wines the judges will choose the best and the public will notice his medal wins. He may not realise that he is causing the system to break down by not limiting the number of entries. The PR media is also jaded and exhausted by medal announcements (despite Huon Hooke’s calculation that in capital city shows less than half the entries receive a medal so even a bronze medal is useful). For example, the 2000 Royal Melbourne Show received 3,930 entries and total medals were 1,890 or 48%.

• He believes that the wines of others cost as much to make as his do and that value has nothing to do with quality. He
may not realise the huge disparity of costs and selling prices of wines. Yet one of his objectives should be to understand the relationship of his wine to the market, so he needs to know the recommended retail price of medal winners.

The show results when published should indicate the maker’s proposed recommended retail price, which achieves the same result for the maker and consumer as Adelaide’s division of classes into price points. Whether show results are being used for marketing or not, the consumer is entitled to know the price range for medal winners.

If the assumption is correct that the small producer has all of these reasons for entering, it makes the show system more important for it is doubtful the system has as many benefits for the other producers: Do large producers really want or expect to get useful quality assessment from their entries? Are not entries from some companies in the hands of marketers who have medal winning as their main objective and who annually analyse the pH, TA and alcohol of medal wins to establish a winning formula?

As the small exhibitor moves through the system, disillusion often sets in. For example when he discovers in a capital city show that a whole region’s wine of its premium variety, produced in an exceptionally good year, has not produced a single gold medal in a class.

At this point he realises that he has entered a lottery, and the more tickets he buys, the better his chance of winning. So he puts all his wines in as many eligible classes as permitted.

The professional or experienced winemaker has always known this, but now the problem is being aired so widely it has become the established universal truth.

If the small exhibitor has most to gain from a good system he has a responsibility to help the shows limit their entries to improve the system. Small producers are sufficiently intelligent, objective and realistic to accept some fair system of restricting the number of entries. They can decide honestly if they are entering shows for assessment or marketing reasons.

If entering primarily for assessment, they should enter in the most appropriate regional show, but not a state or capital city show until that particular wine has won a medal at a qualifying show—regional for state, state for capital city.

If entering primarily for marketing reasons, and if the quantity of wine produced and on-hand justifies an entry with all the effort, time and expense those judges are giving the wine, then a state or capital city show would be justified, and greatly increased fees should be paid.

Other external, imposed restrictions should include a ban on entering unbottled wines at state or capital city shows, for there is not a level playing field here. The small producer seldom has the time or equipment to prepare unbottled wines for shows, so big producers who have both normally win the medals.

This in itself may be one of the causes of excessive entries because at The Royal Melbourne Show in the year 2000 there were:

- 580 out of 3,930 entries from the 2000 vintage.
- 650 reds from the 1999 vintage of Cabernet, Shiraz, and other non-Pinot Noir varieties.
- A total of 1,230 probable unbottled wines. This rule would therefore have reduced the Melbourne Show total by 31% to 2,770.

The reason for not judging unbottled wine at capital city shows is not in debate, for it is uniformly agreed to be sensible.

Unbottled wines for assessment purposes should be entered in the appropriate regional show (Cowra, Rutherglen, Red Hill Cool Climate Show) and since it is for assessment purposes only, no medals should be awarded.

For marketing reasons in shows, some existing limitations should be made uniform and stand:

- Each wine entered only once.
- Minimum quantity produced and on hand at show time.
- Sliding scale of fees whereby bigger companies pay more than the small producer per entry. A greater number of entries should attract a bigger fee per entry than a smaller number of entries. Alternatively, the cost of entering could be on a sliding scale, depending on the size of the company (the bigger the company the more per entry) and the number of entries the company makes to ensure that the organisers of the show system remain viable. Another option might be to relate the number of entries to the tonnes crushed or cases produced.

Conclusion

This seminar is important because it has aired many of the problems with the present system. It allows each stakeholder to see how the others operate and the problems caused by the industry’s own actions.

We can see the overkill:
- Of judges
- Of wine writers
- By large exhibitors and by small exhibitors.

Unless future directions change, small producers should not enter capital city shows, thereby depriving those shows of many wines of diversity, and relegating such shows to perhaps a dozen large producer-groups only. This will surely eventually destroy the reputation, influence and credibility of certain capital city shows.

Are we not too imaginative for that?

The problem has been aired for many years. In 1998/9 an international judge says he told Melbourne Wine Show organisers they should be ashamed of themselves in acclaiming their quantity of entries rather than the quality. This was the stage at which the show organisers were boasting of their record number of entries.

Finally, to progress the issue, a series of genuine symposia from each of the stakeholders to solve the issue might put everyone in a relaxed, contented and constructive frame of mind. The sort of symposium that Jancis Robinson defines in her Wine Companion would be suitable.