

The James Halliday interview

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Over the last few years, I've been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to meet some of my wine heroes. On this occasion, though, I was especially pleased to be meeting James Halliday, simply because he was the writer whose words introduced me to wine back in the early 1990s. You see, I learned wine the wrong way: rather than start with the Old World classics in time-honoured fashion, I began with Australian wine, and Halliday was my guide (with a bit of Oz Clarke on the side): I still have the well thumbed copy of *Sainsbury's Guide to Australian Wine* which was my first wine book. Halliday is one of the easiest of all wine writers to read: he has an infectious style—friendly, flowing and authoritative.

When I met him at the Coldstream Hills winery in Australia's Yarra Valley, it was late afternoon on a hot early Autumn day. His teeth were stained from tasting another 150 wines for his annual wine guide: the deadline was close, altogether some 5000 wines need sampling each year—a task that's more arduous than it sounds. James went off to fetch a couple of ice-cold Coopers, and we sat and chatted about his career in wine.

James was introduced to wine through his father, a doctor, who created a small cellar in the Halliday family home in Bellevue Hill, Sydney. In these postwar years, drinking table wine wasn't a common practice in Australia: fortified wine was dominant, and as late as 1960 this accounted for some 90% of all vineyard production. Wine writing didn't exist

outside trade publications, and the table wines that existed went under pilfered generic names such as Claret, Burgundy, Hock, Riesling and Chablis.

In 1956 James began studying law at the University of Sydney, beginning his career as a lawyer in 1962, becoming a partner at Clayton-Utz in 1966. It was in the mid-1960s that he met his mentor, the legendary Len Evans. Evans was Australia's first great wine communicator, and is credited by many as having a pivotal role in the amazing success of the Australian wine industry through the 1970s and 1980s. 'He succeeded because he had a natural palate, and an ability to draw people towards him', recalls Halliday. Around this time Evans opened Bulletin Place, a fine wine shop and restaurant housed in a historic 1816 warehouse. Every Monday, Evans would host a small group of three lawyers—James, Tony Albert and John Beeston—and restaurateur Neville Baker, for lunch, in what became known as Bulletin Place Front Row.

Through this, Len introduced James to French wine. In 1967 Len served James a 1962 La Tache, an experience James describes as 'the beginning of the end'. Significantly, Bulletin Place introduced this group to the great wines of Europe. It also led to James' first writing commission, and eventually spurred James, John Beeston and Tony Albert to establish their own winery in the Hunter Valley.

They spent a couple of years searching, but in 1970 succeeded in buying a 10 acre block near the intersection of the McDonalds and Broke Roads in Pokolbin. This was to become Brokenwood. The first acre and a half was planted in 1971, and the three lawyers got their hands dirty doing a lot of the tractor work and planting themselves ('it was agonizing', James recalls), as well as the pruning and picking. The first wine was made in 1973, from a ton of Shiraz and half a ton of Cabernet, at Rothbury. 'We did the Shiraz in an open-top fermenter, and when the three of us were due back in Sydney we had to press it and put it in barrel at 2 Baume', [before fermentation had completed] says James. 'At that stage barrel fermenting of reads was already done with Grange and at Wolf Blass, but people didn't talk about it.' Halliday stumbled on it and it has been part of his winemaking toolkit ever since. He was involved with Brokenwood for just over a decade, but had to leave when he moved to Melbourne in 1983.

Despite the excellence of the Brokenwood wines, it is as a wine writer that Halliday made his greatest contribution to the Australian wine scene. Most of this work was done while he was still a Partner at Clayton Utz. 'I was doing a lot of corporate work involving heavy duty finance', he recalls. 'I caught a lot of planes, so it was an ideal environment for writing. 'I read voraciously as a child and trained as a lawyer, and I had the lucky ability to write things well the first time.' His first book was *The Wines and History of the Hunter Valley*, written in the late 1970s, and he began to gather an impressive array of newspaper and magazine columns. Further books followed, concentrating on the wines from each of the major wine-producing states. It was while James was researching the Victorian book that the seed for the next episode in his life began to form. From his Bulletin Place days he'd nurtured a love of Pinot Noir, and the Pinots he tried from Seville Estate and Mount Mary in the Yarra Valley in 1978 impressed him greatly. 'They were so far away from anything else being made at the time in Australia', he remarks. 'It was love at first sight, and I knew that some day, somehow, I would end up in the Yarra Valley.'



The vineyards at Coldstream Hills in the Yarra

In 1983 James and his wife finally got to move to the Yarra, as he moved to Clayton Utz' Melbourne office, on the understanding that if he wanted to retire in five years time to concentrate solely on wine, that would be fine. His initial plan was to make wine from bought-in grapes in someone else's winery until he was retired, but it didn't quite work out like that. In 1985 he found the perfect property: 40 acres with a house on it, and couldn't resist. They bought it in August 1985 and planted the first vines in December of that year. Coldstream Hills was born.

But in case this is sounding all too idyllic, a series of unfortunate events dampened the dream somewhat. Two years later an adjoining property came onto the market. 'It was such a natural add on we had to buy it', says James. To fund its purchase, he made a small listing on the stock exchange, raising AU\$1.5 million, at the end of 1987 when the markets were unravelling and the real estate market was going like the clappers. 'The game plan was to do a management buyout and get the shareholders out of the way', recalls James, but events conspired against this. The winemaking market crashed after a three year recession, and so in the end more share issues were made.

This ultimately created the conditions where Southcorp were able to make a takeover offer in 1996. Effectively, James had bought high and sold low, at least in terms of market conditions. In 1997 he was appointed Southcorp Group winemaker, responsible for a number of estates, a position he continued in until May 2000, when he resigned. Since then he has continued to be involved in a consultancy role for Coldstream Hills, and still lives in his spectacularly situated house on a separately owned bit of the property.

After the interview, we wandered over from the winery to his house, where he showed me his cellar. I'd told James about some of the problems I'd had getting my book, *Wine Science*, past the first set of academic reviewers in California: they hadn't liked the writing style, which they thought was too approachable; they didn't like the inclusion of chapters on biodynamics and the perception of wine; in short, they wanted it to look

more like a textbook, written in an academic style. He picked out a book from his collection which he gave to me, Chandler Burr's *The Emperor of Scents*, which tells the tale of an olfaction researcher with a novel theory of how olfactory receptors work, and the trouble he has had getting his work through the peer review system. It was a thoughtful and kind gesture.



The view from James' house

We then went to the tasting room, and I worked my way through the extensive Coldstream Hills range. James' thoughts on the Yarra as a wine region are that it's an excellent Pinot Noir area, and properly made Chardonnay is arguably the best grape for this region. He rates Shiraz very highly, particularly with appropriately used Viognier in the blend. When he began he planted Merlot and Cabernet Franc, but Franc was a disaster. Merlot was a boom grape but plantings have levelled off. 'There are so many miserable Merlots in Australia', maintains James, blaming the clones available as part of the problem.

James Halliday has had a remarkable career, as a lawyer, writer and a winemaker. 'I've worked harder in the years since I left Clayton Utz than before', he says, in response to those who might think things got easier once he ditched the day job. And in answer to those who suggest that winewriters shouldn't also make wine he responds by saying that 'it's like saying a chef shouldn't write a cookery book'. I think I agree with him.