Full transcript of an interview with

PHILIP LAFFER

[date not recorded]

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

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Phil, to begin with, where and when were you born?

PL: I was born in Adelaide in October 1940, so I’m coming up shortly to a sixty-second birthday.

Who were your parents, Phil?

PL: My parents were Len and Dorothy Laffer. My father was brought up in Loxton. He was one of the first group of agricultural science graduates going through University of Adelaide, and amongst the people who went through was John Fornachon. So very early in his career he actually spent some time working, briefly with John Fornachon, on wine research. Then some years later, in the very early 40’s, by which time I was born, we moved to Roseworthy College where he worked with Alan Hickinbotham. Dad was a lecturer in wine chemistry at Roseworthy—I’m guessing now—until about 1944. So there was a link back then. Thereafter he moved out into a whole range of other things, although at one stage of his life he ended up as Chairman of Basedows. So there’s been a wine link all the way through. And other parts of my family actually own vineyards all around Adelaide.

These are your siblings, Phil?

PL: No. These would be cousins—well, they’re probably uncles and great uncles. Own land around the Sturt. In fact, there’s a triangle opposite Flinders University -
Indeed there is.

PL: which has still got some vineyards on it, which is known as the Laffer Triangle. So we sort of have a viticultural -

That’s where the fault line runs. *(Laughs)*

PL: Exactly. That’s the reason that the vines remained there. Because the Government having resumed it, then discovered they couldn’t actually do what they wanted to do with it.

So your family’s had this link. And did you have any siblings?

PL: Yes. I have a brother who has no involvement. He’s involved in agriculture but no involvement in wine whatsoever.

So where were you educated, Philip?

PL: I was educated at Scotch College in Adelaide and then went to Roseworthy in 1958. At that stage the oenology course had been closed down through lack of interest, and the fellow who was in charge of it, Rex Kuchel, had been seconded by the Commonwealth Government and loaned to—I forget now—either Crete or Malta to help them reconstruct their wine industry sometime after the Second World War. So I did agricultural science at Roseworthy. Graduated in 1991. And by that time, fortunately, the oenology course had started again, and it started with two students in 1960 I guess. And then six of us did the course in ’61 and ’62. So I graduated at the beginning of 1963.

How did you find the course? Was Rex back by then?

PL: Yes, Rex was back by then. No, no. Rex was back for the beginning of it, and then he retired from Roseworthy and went to the Botanic Gardens.

*(Sounds like, Under) (couldn’t decipher word)*
**PL:** Yes, that’s right. And a fellow called Bob Guy took over. Bob I guess was there for our second year, but the course was sort of being reformed. It was an interesting stage because the industry had just started I guess to move from fortified wine to table wine. I mean, it was still very, very much a fortified wine industry, and distillation remained a fairly large part of the course. In hindsight—well, you can’t say in hindsight. I mean, I’ve had little cause to use those distillation skills (*laughs*) for the last thirty years, although initially I guess they were important. In those days it was predominantly chemistry and microbiology. The winemaking side of it was pretty rudimentary because the cellar I guess was based probably on 1940 principles.

**This is the Roseworthy -**

**PL:** The Roseworthy cellar. And most of the experience was actually gained in working vintages whilst one was there. But the winery had a great cellar so there was good opportunity to learn a lot about tasting wine. And I can remember that George Fairbrother used to come up and take us through a number of tasting sessions, and he in fact was the examiner for the tasting exam.

**At that point he would have been Chief Judge for the Adelaide Wine Show.**

**PL:** He was at that stage, yes. And his son, Peter, was actually at Roseworthy with me when I did agriculture. He had no inclination to go into the wine industry. He didn’t follow in his father’s footsteps.

**Well, George was supposed to have a very keen palate I believe.**

**PL:** Yes, remarkably good palate. And it was interesting because he—I mean he wasn’t a practicing winemaker. He actually worked for a company that sold various bits and pieces to the wine industry and acted as wine brokers. And I had a lot to do with him years after in his wine broking role. But he had an extraordinary palate and he was also a great teacher.
So tell me a bit about those early vintages that you worked, Phil. Where were they?

PL: My first two vintages were in 1959 and ‘60 at, what was then, the Glenloth winery.

Down near Horndale?

PL: Down near Horndale, yes. No longer there. Nowadays covered in houses. And we lived at Blackwood. Not so long ago I actually drove from Blackwood across to where the winery was to see what was left. I used to ride a bike there and I wonder how the hell I could possibly have done it because it’s quite a long way.

So I did my first two vintages there, although at that stage I wasn’t studying oenology but had the intention to. Phil Tummel, who was the winemaker there, had been a student of my father’s, so I guess that was the connection that gave me the entree into the Robertson winery. And the experience was largely to do with unloading sultanas at the end of a fork and filling barrels of fortified wine for export. Whilst at Roseworthy I did my first vintage with Tolley, Scott & Tolley at Nuriootpa. At that stage it was a stand-alone organisation. And because brandy and distillation was still quite an important part of the business it seemed a sensible place to do a vintage. So I learnt a lot about distillation and a lot about how to preserve alcohol in wines. It’s interesting because nowadays one’s usually trying to reduce alcohols rather than to increase it.

And for my final vintage—I’d actually applied to work at Great Western, and been accepted, and about a month before I was due to go there I got a letter from Colin Preece, who was the manager, and he said, ‘Look, I’m awfully embarrassed but there’s a Seppelt who now wishes to do vintage here. The family have stronger pull than you. I’m terribly sorry but I’m going to have to refuse your request’. As it turned out it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me because my second choice had been to work for Lindemans at Corowa. I wrote away there, and they said, ‘Yes, by all means come for vintage’. And I went there for vintage and worked with quite an extraordinary man called Ron Prince.
Is Ron still alive?

PL: Ron is still alive. Ron is eighty-seven I think.

So where’s he living now, Phil? Do you know?

PL: He’s living in a retirement village just north of Gosford. Somewhere on the lakes. I speak to him from time to time. Both he and Jean are getting on but he still has an interest in the wine industry.

My father had given me a bit of advice in that he said that when you’re looking for a job never work for a cooperative because you’ll have a hundred bosses, and never work for a family company because there’s always going to be somebody irrespective of how good you might be who’s going to come over the top of you. And there weren’t an awful lot of publicly listed companies in those days, but it so happened that Lindemans were one. And whilst I was there during the vintage in 1962 I said to Ron, ‘Can you give me some advice as to where I might work?’ And he said, ‘Lindemans haven’t put on anybody for four or five years. There might possibly be a placement. I’ll write away’. Because in those days you didn’t use the telephone unless it was a matter of life and death. So he wrote away, and the letter came back whilst I was there. It said that if he likes to come up at Easter time we’ll interview him. So I caught the train to Sydney, had the interview with, primarily, Ray Kidd, who at that time was the chief winemaker, and Bert Bear, who was the managing director of the company—which is a separate story about Doug Lamb(?), Bert Bear and Ray Kidd, but that’s for another time.

Anyway, they subsequently wrote to me and said, ‘Yes, we’ll offer you a job at Corowa’ as an assistant winemaker I suppose. I forget what the term was. And in fact by the time I got around to joining in January the following year Bert Bear had died and Ray Kidd had moved from being chief winemaker to being—I think in those days people were probably called managing directors, not CEO’s. So by remarkably good fortune, and some coincidence, I joined Lindemans in 1963 at Corowa.
Had you completed the Roseworthy course?

PL: Yes. Well, effectively I finished at the end of '62, and ducked back for a graduation some time, but I started I think on the 6th or 7th of January because they said, 'If you’re going to join us, you’d better get here pretty quicky’. There was no mucking around.

What was Corowa like as a place?

PL: The town itself was quite fascinating because in those days New South Wales had poker machines, Victoria didn’t, and the sporting facilities at Corowa were absolutely staggering. Had the best tennis courts, the best bowling greens, the best golf course, totally funded by Victorians coming across the border and providing the locals with these remarkable facilities. *(Laughs)* But from a wine viewpoint, Corowa and Rutherglen of course at that time seemed to be as one district. And not only were there lots of fascinating wines but there were lots of absolutely fascinating people. Ron Prince himself. George Smith senior—that’s sort of senior to the current senior George Smith. Keith Woodroofe at Seppelts. Bill Chambers had not long come back to Rutherglen from working in Clare. Mick Morris and his father, Charlie. There were some absolutely fascinating people who were—they were a whole lot of things. They were hard players, they were great fun, but they had this extraordinary interest in fortified wines and this great interest in teaching people things. I mean, often sometimes to your detriment, physically.

Physically, yes. *(Laughs)*

PL: It’s quite interesting that that grounding in quality fortified wine is one of the best things that ever happened to me because it taught one a tremendous amount about blending. And I can recall from the day I started that Ron Prince said to me, ‘Right, whatever else you do, every day you work for me you’re going to taste a minimum of twenty wines. I don’t care what else you’re meant to be doing, you’re going to taste twenty wines and talk about them’. And that was a discipline that he implied upon
me, and it was fascinating. I got to taste an extraordinary range of what were almost totally fortified wines, but learnt an awful lot about blending flavours.

So is this local product?

PL: This was all local product. Well, all of the quality wine was local product, and it was extremely high quality Muscats, Tokays, Palomino sherries, and what have you. But Corowa was also the blending cellar for the commercial fortified wines of Lindemans, which (sounds like, probably) came out of South Australia and Mildura, and were trucked in, matured often in barrel at Corowa and then blended and sold under the Lindeman Montillo range. So one got to see the very, very top end, but also the all important commercial end.

And my table wine education at that stage was more to do with the wines that were sent down largely from the Hunter Valley to Corowa, and Lindemans always had a lot of internal tastings, which in those days meant travelling usually to Sydney or to the Hunter.

These are the old Lindeman vineyards -

PL: These are the old Lindeman vineyards in the Hunter. And it was before freeways to the Hunter. It was quite an exercise. We would gather in Sydney, travel there by train. Managers were allowed to—I think by that time—fly but the rest of us travelled by train. You think back on these things, it was quite a different time. If we went anywhere we would obviously share rooms. It wasn’t so much cost conscious—I guess they were—but it was the norm. And once a year we would travel up to the Hunter for the annual Hunter River tasting. Karl Stockhausen was the winemaker there at the time. And then the reverse would apply. Everybody would travel down to Corowa for the annual tasting of Corowa fortified wines. I mean, those things are no different to what we do today. One tastes the wine, you make notes and agree on where they should go.
And then in due course, the Leo Buring operation was involved in this tasting process. Leo Buring had been acquired by Lindemans, I think the year before I joined them—maybe two years, 1961 or 1962—because of the attraction of sparkling Rinegolde. And in due course Leo Buring—or Chateau Leonay—became part of this annual tasting trip.

So that was part of the Lindemans group?

PL: That was part of the Lindemans group. From 1961 or ’62 onwards. ’61 I think.

Was Shipster still there then?

PL: Reg was the manager and John Vickery was the winemaker. So not a lot changed there for many, many years because John and Reg worked together—Reg had gone there I think in about 1945. He was a very close friend of my parents, so I’ve known Reg from probably the age of four or five. And then John joined Leo Buring I reckon in the mid 50’s. But they were certainly very much in command in the early 1960’s when I started going there.

And the other interesting thing was that Lindemans themselves were in fact very small winemakers and their business was built entirely on buying wine from other people. And it was at a time when the industry was still strongly fortified wine, so therefore it made sense to buy most of the fortified wine from the large South Australian cooperatives, other than the premium material, which was home-grown at Corowa. And in terms of table wine, the same thing applied, other than the relatively—more than relatively—very small amount that was made at Ben Ean in the Hunter Valley, all the wine was purchased. And one was able to buy, in fact, remarkably good quality wine because the table wine business was very much under-developed at that stage. And we would make excursions around Australia, often accompanied by George Fairbrother who acted as broker in some of this. And the main suppliers of wine to Lindemans in those days were the Stanley Wine Company, Cyril Henschke, D’Arry Osborn, Bleasdale, Rouge Homme, a whole range of companies that
actually nowadays have quite remarkable reputations, and in those days were making remarkably good wine, but there just wasn’t a market for their wine. So Lindemans had access to, in fact, some of the very best wines around Australia, mostly out of South Australia. And of course a lot of table wine for more commercial products again came out of the Riverland, from the cooperatives in particular, what was then Berri Coop. And these wines were trucked back to wherever around the countryside, matured, blended and bottled, and were remarkably good wines because these people from whom we were buying were remarkably good winemakers.

**I was thinking, that would have been Brian Barry probably at Berri in those days.**

**PL:** Brian Berry was at Berri. Doug Collett and Brian Barry.

**Doug Collett.** That’s right.

**PL:** Yes. Mick Knappstein at Stanley. And in due course, Brian Barry of course moved to *(couldn't decipher word)*. Cyril Henschke at Henschkes. D’Arny Osborn of course. And there were a couple of other people in the McLaren Vale area who escape me for the moment. And the Potts family at Bleasdale. That was always one of the highlights, going there, because they were more interested in giving you a good feed of yabbies than selling wine.

**I think it still is, Phil. *(Laughter)*

**PL:** In fact I can recall the very first year we bought wine from them. It must have been about 1964 or ’65. And sometime later in the year, somebody said, ‘Well, we haven’t paid for this wine’. It was discovered that we hadn’t actually received an invoice. So we approached the Potts, and they said, ‘We thought it might have been a bit rude to send an invoice’. *(Laughs)* Times have changed. Anyway, as the industry started to move towards table wine these people who were remarkably good table wine producers obviously started to
develop their own brands. And Lindemans, bit by bit, found themselves getting no longer the first selection but the second selection, and then perhaps ultimately no wine at all. And the first step I guess was to acquire Rouge Homme in 1965 from the Redman family to shore up the Coonawarra part of the Lindeman wine supply. And at the same time Chateau Leonay had been expanded to increase the opportunities in the Barossa Valley, particularly Riesling. And then Lindemans developed much, much further in the South East, based in Coonawarra and Padthaway, and became in fact not only just a large wine company but substantial grape producers in their own right.

So at that time was it, in relative terms, quite a lot cheaper to buy the viticultural land than at present?

PL: Everything’s relative. Because I reckon it must have been roundabout—I was living at Coonawarra at the time—1967 or ’68, and we concluded that buying land at Coonawarra was just far too expensive and we’d better look further afield. And having scouted around the South East generally, settled on Padthaway, and were delighted to find you could buy land at Padthaway for $400 an acre. I forget what the price was at Coonawarra. It might have by that time been up to $1,000, but I can recall thinking that $400 an acre was pretty cheap. And of course in today’s terms, it’s ridiculously cheap. (Laughs) So the development of Padthaway was largely a reflection of increasing land prices in Coonawarra and a need to grow grapes on a fairly large scale to support I guess what we’d call today sort of semi-premium brands—Lindeman Bin 23 Riesling, Bin 45 Claret, Bin 50 Burgundy, as they then were. And Padthaway was, of course, very successful at doing that. And ultimately it’s shown to be, and shown very quickly, that not only could it produce fruit cheaply but also produce some of the highest quality fruit in Australia.

So Phil, at that point, if I’ve got my facts right, Lindemans really had begun part of the push into table wines through Ben Ean Moselle to a large degree.
The first vintage of Ben Ean Moselle was 1956, which was an accident—a mistake. And to overcome the mistake Ray Kidd decided to call it Moselle. The only name they could think of was Ben Ean, and they sold it, and it worked so well that the exercise was then repeated intentionally, and ultimately became the biggest wine brand in Australia. I think at one stage, at its peak, every third bottle of white wine sold in Australia was Ben Ean Moselle. It was quite extraordinary, and the sort of phenomena that could never ever happen again. I mean, it didn’t last for long but it was an extraordinarily important wine for Lindemans, but I think it was an extraordinarily important wine for the industry.

I was thinking about it some time ago and there were various events that have occurred in the Australian wine industry, which I think are extremely significant, and the first one was the introduction of Stuhl(?) Rinegolde by Leo Buring in the 1940’s. And it was the first time that somebody had made a commercially approachable table wine. It was white, it was still, it was sweet, but it was well made clean wine. It came in a fancy (couldn’t decipher word) bottle and people absolutely loved it. And it brought lots of people into wine drinking for the very first time.

Then in the early 50’s, Colin Gramp developed and introduced Barossa Pearl. And again, it was white, it was sweet, but this time it was sparkling. But it was also very well made wine. And that brought more and more people into drinking wine.

Then in the early 60’s into the 70’s, was Ben Ean Moselle. And again, it was white, it was sweet, it wasn’t gassy this time, but it was very well made wine.

And then in 1970, the bag-in-box arrived and that sort of changed everything.

But those three products I think did more to get Australians drinking wine than any other thing. We tend to laugh about them nowadays and say that, well, they were sweet and they were this and that, but the fascinating thing about them is that all three of them were very, very high quality wines. Now, the fruit that went into them, the varieties may not have been
high quality fruit. It might have been Gordo and Sultana and whatever else, but the wines were remarkably well made. And I think that’s a legacy that’s stuck with Australia all the way through. When one talks about sort of the vin ordinaire that people in other countries around the world drink, it’s appalling wine that would never ever succeed in Australia. The sort of wine that we put in casks in this country, other people put into bottles. We’ve had this history -

Oh, worse than.

PL: Exactly. *(Coudn’t decipher word)* of winemakers *(couldn’t decipher word)* drinking of expecting good quality wine.

There’s one other there. That would be Hamiltons Ewell Moselle.

PL: Hamiltons Ewell sort of came along with Ben Ean but it never got to the size of Ben Ean. It probably played a far more dominant role in South Australia and Victoria, whereas Ben Ean was probably doing that in New South Wales and Queensland.

Maurice Ou took that to a new range, but Hamiltons had introduced through—anyway refrigeration came in in the 30’s there.

PL: Yes, they were the first.

That’s way ahead.

PL: Yes.

But, again, it’s a white wine.

PL: Yes. They were white wines but they were always good. Hamiltons Ewell Moselle was slightly different from the others in that it relied on much, much higher levels of sulphur. Mind you, all wines in those days had a lot of sulphur dioxide because some of the bottling techniques were not as sophisticated as they became, I guess, in the 60’s with the advent of cold filter, counter pressure, sterile *(couldn’t decipher word)*.

So these are the beverages that really brought Australians to -
PL: Brought people to drinking wine. As I say, we laugh about it nowadays, and yet they brought us in. They were high quality wines and, sure, we’ve moved on from them but there’s still a role for that kind of wine as the transition from soft drink, milk shakes, whatever it might be, to wine drinking.

I’ve actually heard that argued for China.

PL: Yes. And it’s probably quite true. And we can never overlook the fact that in this country still 50% of the still table wine is sold in bag-in-box. In fact it’s more than that, it’s closer to 60%. And a big proportion of that is still white wine—clean white wine—but sweet, or slightly sweet. So that style of wine is still doing a great task in Australia. We tend to forget about the cask market but you only have to look at the statistics to say that, well, it’s still 60% of what we drink.

So, Phil, by the time, say, you were at Coonawarra in the mid 60’s, had you met some real characters?

PL: I still think the greatest characters I ever met were the blokes at Rutherglen. I mean, they really were something quite different. They’ll stick in my mind forever as some of the most delightful, entertaining and unusual people, and pleasant, that I’ve ever met. Old George Smith one night had been across at Lindemans, and their winery was directly across the Murray but it was quite a way around through Wahgunyah to get there. And he had a policy of not having any telephones at the winery. It was part of his eccentricity. And very limited electricity. And he asked me if I’d like to go back to taste some sherries. Ron Prince cautioned me against it, but being young and stupid I said, 'I'd
love to’. So we hopped in his ute and drove across to the winery. He stopped the ute by driving into the winery, which I thought was a unique—I mean, we weren’t going all that fast but maybe five or six miles an hour. But that’s how you stopped the ute, by just driving straight into the old All Saints winery. *(Laughs)* And then fumbling around in the middle of the night, with very limited electric light and lanterns, finding samples of some fascinating old sherries that neither of us probably were in fit condition to taste. But that was sort of the nature of the fellows there. One would have to say that nowadays they’d be occupational health and safety hazards—the whole lot of them. *(Laughs)*

**The fellows themselves?**

**PL:** The fellows themselves. *(Laughter)*

One of the first investments that All Saints—modern equipment—was that they’d bought an Wilmes air-bag press. They’d seen the ones at Lindemans, which we’d bought maybe three or four years earlier. They bought one that they had on wheels in the winery and moved around with a horse that pulled it, which is another unusual thing to do. And one of the drawbacks of air-bag presses was that if you left fruit in them and it started to ferment the pressure built up inside such that it was impossible to open the doors, and the only way to relieve the pressure was to actually dissemble the presses. And this happened at All Saints because they’d gone off to lunch, or whatever. Anyway, we got a phone call late in the evening to say that they had this serious problem with the tank press, and would I go over. So I zipped over there, and by that stage they had the whole thing roped up—wrapped in ropes—and old George was on top with a crowbar, driving this crowbar into the press. Every time he drove the crowbar in there would be a spurt of highly compressed grapes fly out into the roof. *(Laughs)* In one season he completely destroyed his new press. But that was sort of the approach of these fellows. You know, science didn’t come into it. *(Laughs)* Very rudimentary.
I guess one meets a lot of fascinating people in this industry, but in terms of characters those blokes would hold their own anywhere in the world.

**Well, the wineries I suppose were pretty old wineries.**

**PL:** The wineries were old. The industry was not a wealthy industry, so there had not been a lot of investment. Winemakers were very much hands-on mechanics. If you wanted to reverse the direction of a pump you just swapped the wires around. The sorts of things nowadays that would be very much frowned upon. And you were part winemaker and very much part mechanic. Part designer. I guess a lot of the innovation in the 60’s and 70’s in Australia was very much home-grown. And where there was a need, things were developed. Lindemans developed a drainer to produce delicate white wines, which in turn was then picked up by a company called Miller in Adelaide, who made a lot of similar things called a Miller Drainer, and for a long time they were the work-horse of the white wine industry in Australia. I mean, well and truly superseded nowadays but that was sort of a home-grown Australian invention. And there were lots of things like that where people innovated, but innovated generally with a view to trying to make better and more attractive wine. No doubt productivity and efficiency came into it, but always with how do you make something better.

I think Australian winemakers, and for that matter more recently viticulturists, are the most prepared anywhere in the world to try new ideas. You know, once somebody in Australia had refrigeration, then everybody realised immediately the benefits and everybody raced into refrigeration. Colin Gramp brought pressure fermentation into Australia in the 1950’s and then within a couple of years everybody else had the same sort of equipment. So we’re not being hidebound as the Europeans have in terms of saying that this is what my grandfather did, so we’ll have to do the same thing. And it’s very much reflected in Australian winemaking. Perhaps more so nowadays in the quality of our viticulture.
It’s sad to see a lot of European vineyards that you know could produce vastly better fruit but they’re, on the one hand, totally against change, and also to some degree bound up in ridiculous old-fashioned legislation that prevents them doing a lot of sensible things in any event, which is a pity. I mean, in the meantime Australia marches ahead. It’s always struck me that it’s not good for any wine industry in the world to have anybody producing bad wine. You could argue that as long as the Europeans continue to make bad wine the easier it is for Australia. But I think the truth of the matter is that as soon as the Europeans get their act together, which hopefully in time they will, and produce better wine, then there’s a greater opportunity for wine generally and more and more people will either come back to wine or drink more wine, and that still remains a great opportunity for Australia.

Wasn’t it in Australia, too, the likes of John Fornachon and the Wine Research Institute that other countries didn’t have?

**PL:** California had it, but some fifteen years later they lost all of that advantage through not—and it’s an interesting point that Australia had the Wine Research Institute and the likes of John Fornachon and those after him, but the thing that made the Australian Wine Research Institute successful was not so much John Fornachon but was the decision of the industry to work cooperatively and together in research. And that’s been a unique situation that doesn’t apply in almost any other industry in the world, and even in the wine industry in many other countries. And what had been a very good model in California fell apart some fifteen or twenty years ago when the winemakers refused to work together because somebody thought that, well, hang on, I’ve got an idea that is mine and you can’t have it. Now, the ridiculous part about that is that you’ve only got to look over the fence to find out what the other bloke’s doing, so it’s hard to keep secrets in this industry. But Australia remains remarkably successful because of (a) its commitment to research, but (b) the fact that all of that research work is done cooperatively. We fund it, and the amount of work we do here is far greater than we could do individually because it’s
done collectively. We have, without doubt, the best Wine Research Institute in the world. We now have probably the best viticultural researchers in the world. We generate something like 15% of the world’s total viticultural research for a country that produces 6 or 7% of the world’s wine. And that 15% that we generate in this country we, in a fashion, barter or trade for the 85% that’s produced elsewhere in the world. The benefit to us is that the 15% we give away—the rest of the world says ho hum—85% we get, and if it’s a good idea we adopt it. I think Australian farmers, not just grape growers, have always been remarkably good at adopting new technology and new ideas. So for the 15% that we give away we get an enormous benefit.

**That’s because it’s such a bally hard country to work.**

**PL:** Yes. Whereas you talk to French researchers, and there’s some remarkable work done there, and they just despair. They have no shortage of money because the EU pours money into research, but they just cannot get the local viticultural industry to adopt this good work that they’re doing. So we pick it up like that.

**You spoke about in your early years at Rutherglen the likes of George Smith would call you over, and you knocked around with the other fellows. I know just here where we are now at Orlando, Colin Gramp used to see Rudi Kronberger regularly, and Vickery and people like that, and they’d share their ideas—oh, with the cold pressure fermentation stuff and actually swap wine to taste, too. In your experience, was that type of sharing of ideas common?**

**PL:** Extremely common, and it remains common to this day. The only reason it’s—and I mean this quite sincerely—not quite so common today is that everybody is so damn busy. I mean, the expansion of the industry at the moment means that people have little time to scratch themselves and some of the sort of interchange and exchange that used to go on is now not done, not because we don’t want to but because it’s hard to find the time. But I think it’s been extremely important in the development of the Australian wine industry because it’s developed Australian winemakers, and
no-one’s been allowed to sort of wither on the vine. Everybody’s been included in this process. And it still goes on, perhaps not as informally as it once did, because we are busy, but I don’t see any signs whatsoever of any organisation saying that I don’t want my people to be part of it or my people to share in it because we’ve got something special. I think that still exists, and it still exists very strongly amongst the winemakers. I notice amongst the young winemakers in this organisation that most of their social life is spent with other winemakers and viticulturists from other companies. So this sort of intercourse and exchange still goes on, and I think it’s extraordinarily important.

**So Phil, how long did you stay with Lindemans?**

**PL:** I stayed with Lindemans for twenty-seven years, until 1990, and the reason I guess that I’m no longer there—because I suppose in those days you joined a company thinking it was a career for life—was that we were asked to sell the company—it was owned by Philip Morris at the time and they had bought Lindemans in 1971—with a view that the wine industry worldwide was going to be a very successful business, and I guess somewhere along the way it was shown not to be perhaps quite as profitable as they’d anticipated. Certainly not as profitable as tobacco, and beer, which was a big part of their business. And they’d hung on to Lindemans for a long, long time, fortunately. But ultimately it became the pimple on the pumpkin and the decision was taken to sell it. It was sold to, what was then, Adsteam that owned Penfolds, and it was obvious to me that henceforth Lindemans was going to probably move rapidly towards being a brand rather than a company and a culture and whatever else. So I decided to stay for the transition, which I did, and then retire. It was a fascinating twenty-seven years. And this is no criticism of Orlando for whom I work now, but I’d probably still be there if it had remained as a stand alone entity.

**So did you come to Orlando immediately?**
PL: No. I thought about life for six months. I did a bit of consulting. I wasn’t too sure what I wanted to do. I was living in Sydney at the time, which was where Lindemans were headquartered, and Orlando approached me. I’d always been an admirer of Orlando. Well, in fact, Lindemans collectively I think were great admirers of Orlando because Lindemans and Orlando were the two companies that largely controlled the quality white wines that Australia produced. And over the years there’d been sort of times when we were very close to Orlando. There were times when we were miles apart and taking them on in Court with issues over the correct way to produce pearl wines, but there had always been this admiration of the fact that Orlando were very much quality winemakers and dedicated and had similar winemaking ideals as Lindemans.

I think it’s probably fair to say that towards the end of the 80’s it was apparent to everybody that Orlando was going in a different direction, probably because the—I don’t want to be unkind here—Reckitt & Colman ownership seemed to have lost interest and the focus was very much on the very, very commercial end of the business—Carrington, Coolabah. But they had this sort of emerging brand, Jacobs Creek. And when they approached me one of the reasons that I joined them was because of Jacobs Creek.

Now it seems an unusual thing to say but one of the things that I was most proud of in working with Lindemans was my ability to contribute to the development of Ben Ean Moselle. Now, sure, it’s a commercial product and what have you, but it was, I always thought, an enormous challenge to make wine of that quality in those sorts of volumes. And that similar challenge existed with Jacobs Creek and Orlando. So I joined them about the beginning of 1991 and took over the role of winemaking in 1993, and then chief winemaker I think about ’94. And it’s been busy, but it’s been an enormous challenge and enormous fun to see Jacobs Creek, in particular, develop. I mean, sure, other products have as well but the most exciting thing has been to see the growth of Jacobs Creek, which I guess is—and it’s no reflection on me, and I don’t accept for one moment
and suggest that I’m the result of it, but it’s grown almost tenfold in those ten years. And it’s been spectacular.

The pleasing thing, to me, has been to see the way that we’ve been able to focus on the style of Jacobs Creek and keep it contemporary, but at the same time improve the quality year on year. So much so that now there is a commitment within the company, right from the very, very top, that says that each successive vintage of Jacobs Creek has got to be more appealing than the previous. Now, it can be challenged sometimes, but the commitment is such nowadays that if it means we make less wine, then the sacrifice is less volume to achieve the quality increase in the belief that this is a brand that’s going to be around for a long, long time. So very similar sort of quality philosophies as I grew up with in Lindemans. So I guess to some degree Orlando benefited from the training I got in Lindemans, which was a highly disciplined approach to quality winemaking.

**Looking back over your years with Lindemans and coming into Orlando, Phil, what are the major critical events that you perceived along the way that really affected Australian wine?**

**PL:** Well, I guess that there have been several things. There have been attitudes in terms of drinkers. You don’t have to go back all that far when we drank seven times as much white wine as we did red. There was a boom in red wine drinking in the 70’s that was false, when people drank red wine because they thought it was the right thing to do, and then somebody made an unfortunate statement about histamines and overnight red wine sales collapsed because everybody was able to say, ‘Well, I like red wine but it gives me a headache, so unfortunately I can’t drink it’. And we sort of went back to drinking white wine, but in the process moved up in higher quality. And then red wines progressively came back. I think the comments I made earlier on about those three white wines were dramatic.

There have been technological improvements all the way along, and one could say that refrigeration did this, and refrigeration did that, but to me they’re minor issues in terms of the overall development of the industry.
Probably the most telling thing was when people realised that export markets weren’t to get rid of the stuff you didn’t want to drink at home but were, in fact, a place to sell the wines that you did drink at home, and perhaps the sort of wines that we like, the rest of the world might like. And there’d been a lot of attempts of exporting Australian wine prior to the 80’s. All had failed because it was seen as an exercise of quitting what we didn’t want. And with people attempting in the 80’s to actually sell branded Australian wine overseas—Lindemans in the United States and Orlando in the United Kingdom—suddenly people realised that we had something very special in Australia in terms of style and our ability to produce high quality, affordable wines. And in the last fifteen years the growth has been extraordinary based on that very simple premise, that branded wines, which people easily understand, good quality, affordable and also of a style that’s appealing. And that’s been the cause obviously of the enormous expansion at the moment.

You could also say that the commitment to research and development. Now that’s probably had the biggest influence on the quality of Australian wine but it wasn’t that somebody overnight discovered one particular new thing. It’s been a series of things from when John Fornachon started in the 1940’s and the creation of the Wine Research Institute in the mid 1950’s, that there’s been an ongoing outcome of not only good applied research but a lot of very good fundamental work, which in turn has led to primarily better ways to grow grapes. But also better ways to make wine. And that’s an ongoing thing. And it’s reassuring to find that the whole industry still has that same commitment to funding more and more research, because people can see, based on what’s happened in the past, that the opportunities for the future are just as great.

We’ve talked a bit about different social influences as we’ve gone through today, Phil, but did you find at, say, Lindemans in particular, and recently too, that there were political factors that impinged on the industry at all?
PL: Not as much as people might think. We talk a lot about taxation, and right at the moment we are more heavily taxed than we’ve ever been, and we’re more heavily taxed than any other wine producing country in the world, and we constantly keep reminding the Government of that point. But rightly or wrongly, despite that, it’s still a very successful domestic industry. I don’t know that in the last twenty years taxation has played an awful lot in terms of either encouraging or discouraging the industry. If we had a more appropriate taxation rate, would we be drinking a lot more wine domestically? I’m not so sure that we would drink an awful lot more, frankly. You know, at around twenty litres per head we lead the ranks of the English speaking world.

I think one could argue that the encouragement of Government from time to time has been given to funding of research. It may have been just as important in a positive sense as some of the adverse impacts they’ve had in terms of taxation. Now I’m not suggesting for one moment that taxation shouldn’t be reduced. Obviously it should. Alternatively, maybe the Government should be investing a larger share of whatever it is they get from this industry into things like research and development, education, promotion of Australian wine overseas. Because this is an industry that very much stands on its own two feet. I think I’d be right in saying that the only Government assistance that we get is a degree of matching funds for research. The Government’s prepared, up to a point, to match industry contribution. That’s something that’s available to every industry. Beyond that we don’t ask for, and we don’t get, any Government assistance, but perhaps there could be ways that that could be done. So I’m not so sure that the political scene has really impaired, or encouraged, the industry greatly over the years.

So just looking back, Phil, what about consumer taste? You’ve mentioned the red wine boom and the white wine boom, but have there been any marked changes really there for you?

PL: I think it’s been more about education. When people come into wine drinking they drink things that are closest to what they’ve been used to,
which is sort of milkshakes and soft drinks, so they start off on the softer, sweeter white wines, but then in time discover that there are more interesting things to taste and different flavour combinations. So people sort of graduate. I mean, it would be wrong to ignore the influence of European migration, and more recently an Asian migration to this country, in terms of food. One could only be *(couldn’t decipher word)* and say that living in the countryside in the 1960’s, the cuisine was fairly basic.

**What it is that Lehmann says? Eggs and steak, and steak and eggs?**

**PL:** Exactly. *(Laughs)* And you got a twenty-six ounce can of Fosters to drink, particularly if you were living in a place like Corowa. So that food influence has had a lot to do with it, but I think really it’s been more people becoming experienced and accustomed to wine, and wine becoming part of our lives and not being something that was seen as a special occasion or odd thing. Wine’s now taken for granted by the larger part of the community. But again, it’s not been an overnight thing. It’s been no doubt encouraged by the improvements in the standard of food that we not only cook ourselves but also can buy when we dine out. But I still put it down to the fact that the more time you spend with wine, the more you’re going to want to experiment and upgrade and what have you. And it’s not as if we’ve moved enormously in terms of the quality stakes. What has happened is that the quality of the wine has moved a long, long way but 90% of what we drink is still probably sold under $10 a bottle, or equivalent thereof.

*(Tape restarted)*

**PL:** We were talking about significant influences on the industry, and one of the unusual ones in fact was the enormously positive impact of foreign ownership in the 1970’s. And roundabout 1970 to 1974 Heinz bought Stanley Wine Company, Philip Morris bought Lindemans, Reckitt & Colman bought Orlando, Rothmans bought Reynella, Tooheys bought into Wynns,
and there was an enormous investment in the wine industry that would never ever have happened had we not had that ownership.

Now, every single one of them eventually bailed out. Tooheys I guess, indirectly, have come back in another way, in a different life, as Lion Nathan. But everyone of those companies left behind it this enormous legacy of a colossal investment. The vineyard developments of Padthaway, wineries like Lindemans Karadoc, would never have happened without the ability of these large international companies to pour an awful lot of money in. They’re now long gone but they arrived at a time where the industry was just taking off, needed a lot of cash to be injected, and I’m quite sure it would never have been got out of the Australian Stock Market at the time. So that was an enormous legacy.

And it’s interesting that it’s only now in fairly recent years that there’s sort of foreign investment coming back into the Australian wine industry, but different kinds of investors this time. People who actually understand perhaps the wine industry but certainly the alcoholic beverage industry.

Phil, thank you very, very much for spending time with us today. It’s been a privilege to hear what you’ve got to say. Very wide-ranging interview. Thank you very much.

PL: Pleasure, Rob.