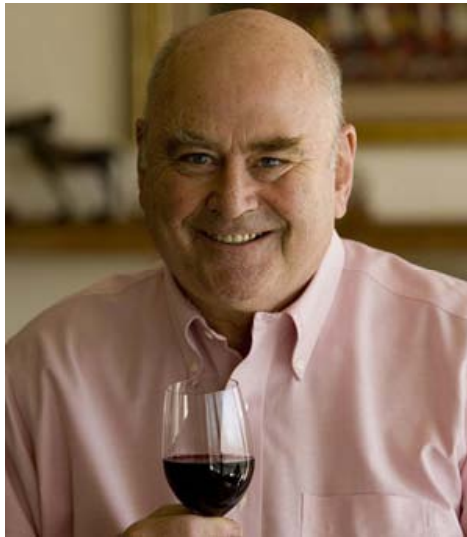




## 2011 Sydney International Wine Competition

Presentation Banquet Keynote Address by James Halliday AM

*The End of an Era – And a New Beginning*



**James Halliday AM**

So much to say, and so little time in which to say it.

On 20 March 1982, Warren Mason organised a seven-course black-tie dinner to honour some of the best Australian small wineries. Selection of the wine was ad hoc, with reputation an important ingredient.

News spread, and the event had to be repeated in 1983. Samples poured in, and formal tastings were organised with leading judges of the day selecting the wines for the dinner. Further excited press comment, most though not all favourable, followed, and it became obvious by 1985 that simply selecting 12 to 15 wines for a dinner was not going to do justice to the many great wineries that had submitted wines.

Thus the Smallmakers Wine Competition was born. Over the next quarter of a century (is that all, it seems much longer?) the Competition continued to evolve. If I were to chronicle each of the changes in any detail, my time would be up without any observations about the present and the future, far more interesting than the past.

But first I must make one observation. The Competition has a three phase judging process. The first is similar to the conventional Australian style wine show system, where the technically best wines are separated out. There are a few specialised categories but most of the finalists are then sorted, blind, by the judges themselves into Style categories, according to their palate weight. Two Panels of six or seven judges then reassess these finalists, now in brackets of similar palate weight, first for their technical excellence, then again alongside a food dish, specifically created by Jacquie Mason, (a Chef beyond compare) that wines of this palate weight should complement. It is this final judging with appropriate food that makes this Competition so unique.

So to the changes in short form. Public tasting of all wines in Australian capital cities (1986-2002), the three major New Zealand cities from 1990 to 2002, London from 1994 to 2002. 1989 open to New Zealand wineries. 1991, the Competition is opened to all producers, and the “Smallmaker” reference is dropped. 1993, and more than half the judges are imported from overseas; 1994, 1,030 entries from eight countries; 1997 Competition’s first website registered 60 visitors, 2001, 30,000 visitors, 2010, 600,000 visitors; 2001, trademark logos; 2003, three-tiered logo system is introduced; 2004, an absolute cap restricting number of entries to 2,000 applies. So it was that this year’s Competition was judged by 14 judges from 5 countries who assessed 2060 wines from 10 countries.

This evolution is an eerily precise reflection of the changes in the world of wines, and Australia’s position in it, since 1985. Between 1975 and ’85 we imported more wine than we exported. On the plus side, per capita wine consumption increased from 8.7 litres per annum in 1970/71 to 21.6 litres in 1985/86, before steadily declining over the next seven years to 18.6 litres per annum. Nonetheless, the overview was that Australia was now a serious wine consuming country, with the highest annual per capita consumption in the English speaking world.

In 1984 Hazel Murphy AM organised a trip to Australia for a group of English Masters of Wine; it was an important part of a jigsaw puzzle that resulted in Australia becoming the fourth largest exporter in the world by 2003, achieving the \$4.5 billion in wine sales that it had visualised for the year 2025 in its 30-year plan created in 1995.

It was a paradigm of the globalisation of the wine trade of today and the future. The 600,000 visitors to the Competition website made the Competition’s gruelling interstate and international TOP 100 tastings unimportant. The internet has likewise played a major role in overcoming Australia’s geographical isolation from Europe and the Americas.

We are not so distant from Asia, however, and it won't be long before our overall trade ties with Asia will be greater than those with the EU and the US combined. Thus we are already ranked second on China's imported wine list, a long distance in front of South Africa, the US and Chile (and a long way behind France).

Wine is being embraced by all of Asia's countries from India in the west to Japan in the east, with countless millions of people anxious to learn more about this near-mystical drink. The TOP 100 is a one-stop shop on the web, and Australia is waiting to welcome those who wish to visit and learn more. A new and exciting era dawns.

Whatever they may say to the contrary, Jacquie and Warren Mason could have had no idea how one small dinner for 48 people in March '82 would so dramatically change, and dominate, their lives for almost 30 years. I hope they look back with pride on their achievements. They deserve to.