



MEDIA RELEASE: 1 MARCH 2011

A light-bodied New Zealander punches above its weight at the 2011 Sydney International Wine Competition

Elephant Hill Estate no doubt raised a few eyebrows at the 2011 Sydney International Wine Competition awards presentation last Saturday when it took out three trophies, including the Joy Lake Memorial Championship Trophy for best wine of the competition, with its 2009 Hawkes Bay Syrah.

The New Zealand entry was also awarded the Mark de Havilland Memorial Trophy for best red table wine of the competition, and the Fildes Labels Perpetual Trophy for best lighter-bodied dry red table of the competition.

Indeed, it was the strength of the wine's emergence from the lighter-bodied dry red category that surprised observers. The only previous instance of a lighter-bodied red winning the Championship Trophy in the 30-year history of the SIWC was back in 1992 when Henschke 1989 Abbots Prayer Merlot Cabernet Sauvignon took top honours.

“It's most unusual for a lighter-bodied wine, especially a lighter-bodied red wine to dominate a major wine show,” said the competition's director Warren Mason.

“These sorts of wines are usually blown out of the water by the sheer power of the top fuller-bodied entries. In most shows they simply don't stand a chance.

“But in the Sydney International, wines are judged alongside appropriately weighted food, and the Elephant Hill performed remarkably well in this context ... a context I've always believed in as the ultimate measure of a wine.”

The competition's judges obviously rated the wine very highly, especially when tasting it alongside the chosen dish of stuffed chicken breasts with roasted red capsicum and mozzarella.

South Australian judge Mark Robertson summed it up this way: “This wine has that extreme white pepper character lift on the nose. It just spices it up magnificently. I was quite taken with this wine. A lovely lifted fruit, elegant, spicy and well constructed palate. It's very good. A lovely example of a cooler-climate shiraz. With food it was outstanding. Balanced, concentrated, powerful and very very good.”

The runner-up to the top wine was another shiraz, the Birds of a Feather 2009 Humming-Bird Margaret River Shiraz, which won the SIWC Reserve Champion's Trophy and the Fesq & Company Perpetual Trophy for best medium-bodied dry red table wine.

It was judged alongside wellingtons of venison with caramelised shallots and english spinach, and drew the following comment from NSW judge Rob Geddes MW:

“Pepper, black fruit and violets. What a wine! Savoury, cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. Silky, savoury, nutmeg, spiced berry fruit flavours with fine oak, fruit tannins. Notes of blackberry, salami and resin to finish. With food, the violets and red fruit flavours were magnificent and magnified.”

James Halliday AM gave the keynote address at the presentation banquet for the 30th Sydney International Wine Competition. His praise of the concept concluded with:

“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.”

For further information on the Sydney International Wine Competition, please contact Warren Mason on 02 4757 4400 or visit www.top100wines.com

High-resolution images from the presentation banquet can be downloaded from WineMedia's website (www.winemedia.com.au).

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