

STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
J. D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY
COLLECTION

OH 692/11

Full transcript of an interview with

WOLF BLASS

on 21 June 2000

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

Access for research: Unrestricted

Right to photocopy: Copies may be made for research and study

Right to quote or publish: Publication only with written permission from the
State Library

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was donated to the State Library. It was not created by the J.D. Somerville Oral History Collection and does not necessarily conform to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription.

Readers of this oral history transcript should bear in mind that it is a record of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The State Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the interview, nor for the views expressed therein. As with any historical source, these are for the reader to judge.

This transcript had not been proofread prior to donation to the State Library and has not yet been proofread since. Researchers are cautioned not to accept the spelling of proper names and unusual words and can expect to find typographical errors as well.

OH 692/11 TAPE 1 - SIDE A

NATIONAL WINE CENTRE, WOLF BLASS FOUNDATION, ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.

Interview with Wolf Blass on 21st June, 2000.

Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Wolf, let's start at the beginning.

You were born in 1934. Tell me a little bit about your family and your background in Germany.

WB: First of all I think it's very important to remember that the 1934 vintage, as far as wine is concerned, has been excellent. So I think I was born at the right time. I came from a background of wine and spirit. As far as the grandparents are concerned, they had a distribution centre in a bottling company. Then my mother was involved—she was working there. However, it was always a complicated time because I was brought up during the War and it was impossible to determine a normal lifestyle. So my upbringing was about 50% as a young person from back home, or with your parents or grandparents, and 50% when I was schooled in different colleges away from home.

The family didn't really count during the time—when I can remember from the time of ten or eleven years onwards. That is probably a sad thing in my life. And then after the War, of course, I have had this unfortunate happening in that I was involved with the 'four' divided Germanys. The Americans and the British were the fighting troops that took over East Germany. This is where I was residing. Then the French took over

temporarily as an occupation troop. And then the whole thing was cleared and then the Ruskies came in. You know, I have seen everything from three different languages. And then, of course, my schooling was concentrated on learning Russian. That was a very complicated situation for most Europeans because of their alphabetic system, which is entirely different. [The Russians use the Cyrillic alphabet]

And from there onwards it became a slight nightmare to my parents. Where did I fit in their life? Because there was no industry. As you realise, there was a total concept being built to demolish everything that was affiliated with industry. So it was only agriculture, viticulture—anything of this nature. Therefore my only choice—I didn't have one because my father made it for me—was to get me into an employment so that there was a bed and I would get some food. Hopefully I would enjoy what I was doing—the viticultural side. I made it back to western Germany, after I crossed the border back—overnight—in 1948 from East Germany to West Germany.

So there has been a lot of confusion in my life between East and West, and parents who shifted. They were political refugees at one stage.

By 1951, the winery complex where I was working was confiscated by the German Democratic Republic, or was it the Soviet occupied regime? Then it was all penniless. Everybody had to move out of Eastern Germany. I was from 1949 in viticultural employment as an apprentice, and that was about three years in two different wine and viticultural stations where I was working. That was up to 1952. Most of the time I was never at home. I mean my family life never really existed.

So you were taught the whole ambit of the winemaking experience, Wolf, from the vineyard—through cooperage too, did you learn all that?

WB: Yeah, I did some cooperage. Suddenly you had the choice between going to get into timber cooperages or the wine cooperages and I shifted over to wine cooperage. That was after, you know, I got my, viticultural diploma—in winemaking. Then I had to work five years in a capacity within the industry to get to what you call the

Kellermeister or the Master of Wine Diploma. That's the rules in the German Chamber of Industry, and whatever the institutions were at the time. So I was working then in different regions in Germany. I learnt liqueur manufacturing. I learnt blending of brandies, vermouths. That was all part of a process in my upbringing where I was working for I think—I remember one mark in ten [DM 1.10] per hour as a qualified person. But that was about the right ratio at the time.

So you did the five years on that, Wolf?

WB: I did then the five years. I was lucky. I was the youngest—I didn't need five years. They allowed me to make my degree—my Master Diploma degree—in the Kellermeister position when I was twenty-three years of age because I had a position to go to in France and had a firm committed position in England through Seitz, which is one of the most highly regarded winery equipment machinery factories in Germany. Therefore the Chamber of Industry and Trade actually had given me permission. They said that I was morally sound to train apprentices. Because once you had this diploma you were allowed to train apprentices. You had to be a Master. And I was twenty-three years of age, and I can assure you I was definitely not morally right! *(Laughter)* But my qualification got me there. I was the youngest guy whoever had the German diploma—when I was twenty-three.

Now, Wolf, you shifted to Bristol—a firm in Bristol? Is that right?

WB: I went to England. I went to London first in the capacity as a wine chemist to introduce sterile bottling because the German wine industry was exporting sweet white wines in wooden oak containers. Absolute madness. Of course, once they arrived on the other side, across the Channel, wines were fermenting. It was a nightmare to arrest them. The equipment wasn't available in England. The technology wasn't ripe. So that was my first job for one year. Once I completed this one I had the opportunity to

shift to Avery & Co as—a nice title—Cellar Superintendent. They called me the Governor then, at the time when I was arriving in London. And that was I think in—this all happened '57/'58. And I stayed there until 1961, which means I had three solid years in England. And during this time I was approached by the overseas Farmers' Union in London, who were importing the Port and the sherry from Australia, and the question was asked, 'Would you like to go to Australia? There's a company called Kaiser Stuhl, they want to make pearl wine. They need somebody and the expertise to develop their style of wine'.

And at the same time I had an opportunity to go to Venezuela for the same jobs.

Venezuela?

WB: Yes, sparkling wines. Sparkling wine. The "Charmat" process, tank fermentation. And of course as soon as I hear about Venezuela— you see I was a young guy. I was twenty-seven years of age. The first thing what I thought was that there's some women involved. There's hot life. You know, it's a life of a party. That's what I was thinking of. I said, 'That's where we go. Time to sign a document to go to Venezuela instead of Australia'.

But during this time, in the process of the negotiation, a revolution broke out in Venezuela. So that fell into a bucket, and then I accepted the offer from Ian Hickinbotham, who was then the General Manager of Kaiser Stuhl wines. I received a three year contract to come to Australia to develop sparkling wines. So in 1961 with a couple of hundred, or a hundred pounds, in my pocket—so they say on the back label these days that I arrived with a hundred pounds, and I've still got it in my pocket, that's what they claim—I arrived in this country. And I think that was the best decision I ever made.

And how did you find Kaiser Stuhl in the Barossa, Wolf?

WB: Yes, I think the saddest thing which I have encountered as a migrant at the time—the Government assistance I think for twenty pounds, or the forty pounds—was when I went to Strand in London (this is where the High Commission is and where they all documented your papers). I asked some questions about Australia, in particular the Barossa Valley. There was nobody there who'd give me any clues about what a rich environment it was and what a place it was to go to. That's what's happened. So the only communication at the time was whatever I received from the management of Kaiser Stuhl to explain to me that there had been a German tradition sitting there since the 1840s, and that the old people were still talking about the wine industry—this and that. But from a Government point of view it was an absolute disaster. They didn't know anything about the Barossa.

Of course, when I arrived, my first stop was in Darwin on the 12th January 1961 (that was the year of the heatwave). I thought I'd arrived in hell. I could not believe that any person could live there. And, you know, there was the high humidity lifting off the Tarmac, and I thought it was rain. You know, heavy rainfall. They said that, no, we haven't seen any rain for months. I really thought, you know, that—it was the biggest shock which I ever had when I went in Darwin. That was the first of landing at the time.

Then they picked me up. From there I was picked up and straightaway had to go to Sydney, and in Sydney I was treated as the new boy arriving at Kaiser Stuhl trying to turn their production around. I was the technical expert who had arrived. They used me as an advertising tool and all this type of thing, and to help with a new distribution network. And I thought that it was quite good. I mean, Sydney suited my lifestyle for a couple of days.

I went to Melbourne. And then when I arrived here in Adelaide I was picked up by the State Manager for the Kaiser Stuhl wine company who drove me up to the Barossa Valley. And from Gawler onwards I thought that we were going to be in some kind of a hillbilly country because it all looked to me that we were going to a country like in

the western films. I mean, you have to—get my mentality right. These type of towns, as I saw them, reminded me of some cowboy films I had seen.

But anyway, that was only my first impression but I settled in -

What was your English like then?

WB: English was alright. I mean, it's just as good as today. Nobody understands me. Nobody does want to understand me. No, English was no problems on that.

How were you received at Kaiser Stuhl?

WB: I think with great expectation because I had already been working in Europe for three months to find out some technical advances for them. Certain items that Ian Hickinbotham wanted from me to find out. He put the cart in front of the horse. But this was his make-up. He was a great theoretical genius but he couldn't convert this into some practical applications. So the confusion between me, him and the technical section was that we could never run on the same track at the same time because he was always ahead of his time. That was probably a situation where you had a great theoretical guy, but I was a practical. So these two things didn't work together. But anyway, we worked it all out I think.

The people accepted me straightaway, as far as the company was concerned, but the wine—my colleagues, that was a little bit of a different thing altogether. I mean, I had to prove a point because I came in as an outsider and probably disturbed some of the peace in what had been a very peaceful wine industry. And here, you know, we had to fight against Orlando. They were the ones who made this Barossa Pearl, and we had to come in and had to fight against them. So it was an interesting era.

And another sad thing was that at the time you were not really allowed to communicate with other winemakers, or with other technical personnel, or with other people who had been affiliated in different companies. It didn't exist in the earlier years, in the sixties. It was all secret. Secret from a technical point of view, secret from management's point of view.

How about the social point of view, Wolf?

WB: Well, the first—the hardest thing which I found was to make some contact with women. I mean, that was the hardest one for me. I'm coming from London, Paris, Frankfurt, and here I come to the Barossa Valley and on Friday nights I get picked up by my good friend Peter Rosenberg—who was the marketing manager. It was also I think the first time I went up to Angaston to a dance was in his FJ Holden. We had to stand 200 metres off the premises of the dance floor with the licence—because there was no licensed premises. Then he took me out and said that we were going to have a drink at the bar. We had to walk 200 metres. He opened his boot and opened a bottle of beer and that was our drink. That was entertainment!

And then all the women were sitting on the left-hand side of the dance floor and the guys were sitting on the right-hand side of the dance floor. So, you know, I looked like meat in a sandwich. I didn't know really where to go or what to do—it was a hard fight. A hard fight to get myself into a cosy position as far as my companion went and as my relationship was concerned. It wasn't an easy way.

How about with some of the other winemakers? Did you get involved with the Bacchus Club pretty quickly, Wolf?

WB: Yes. I got into the Bacchus Club. I did get in all right—because of my status, as I was. But I think I probably the closest relationship outside our company was with

Yalumba. Ray Ward became a great friend of mine. Alf Wark, he was there. He helped me along. Rudi Kronberger. I think these guys were good. The guys from Orlando—Günter Prass, we've been great friends, and yet other guys there were not really allowed to mix with outsiders. So it wasn't an easy thing that—the wine industry was only mingling later on. I created that. But that was only later when I got the wine industry together in the Barossa Valley. But in the earlier stages it was all more or less taboo.

And then I became Secretary of the social club—of the Barossa Valley Car Club, and of course then I made some friends there.

I created sparkling wines, and [to market them] they were pumped out of machine guns—what is it? Elliott Ness? And we tested them in big functions—four or five hundred people functions—whereby we had it all bottled up in—we were pushing the pressure container in a kid's pram and sparkling wine came out of the petrol station, as it was all imitation of course. This is how we tested new products during three years in employment with Kaiser Stuhl. 70% of all sparkling wines on the Australian market were made through my innovative attachment to the technology side. We made wines for Woodleys. We made it for Wynns. We made it for Lindemans. We were making it for Yalumba. Mildara. Every Tom, Dick and Harry wanted the sparkling wine made at the time. I get it thrown at me and said that you have to put another one on the market. The only way to test it was by having these test runs in a funny way. They were good fun.

Talk about your pineapple pearl product.

WB: Oh, that was a funny one, yeah. You see pineapple pearl and cherry pearl, they were twenty years ahead of their time. There was nothing wrong with the system. Only there was the cart, once again, ahead of the horse. Because now we were having these fruit wines. It was quite popular. Only when Ian came up with this idea—Ian Hickinbotham—the packaging was perfect. It looked like a cherry. It looked like a

pineapple. Peel and all. We laughed about it after, that probably they used these bottles, which were so nicely packed, in the Korean War. At the end of the Korean War. And it was, of course, artificial flavour added. (And that was, of course, a stone in Colin Gramp's kidney because he was fighting everybody who wasn't on line sticking with what you call the 'German' wine law. And if it wasn't 100% grape product he was fighting it. That was all whitewashed after but it was an interesting combination. Günter Prass, my counterpart, he had to make all the technical representation in Court. I had to make the representation in Court for the other side. But it was all in whitewash.) In the end, I would think the pop wine made a lot of people happy and we converted beer drinkers (who were then in Australia drinking close to 130 litres of beer per year against one and a half litres of wine) to where we are today. It was the change from beer drinking to wine drinking, and getting women to participate socially on an even par. You know, they were the days when the boys stood around the beer keg in the garage and the women were sitting inside and watching the black and white film and knitting socks. But the sparkling wine changed all that, I think. I'm absolutely convinced of that.

And, Wolf, were fortified wines still a very big part of the public's drinking at that time when you came here?

WB: Yes, I think, you know, when you went to cocktail parties you got a dry sherry. I mean, that was part of the thing. There was no sparkling wine or champagne style of wines, which we have got today. That was what our export actually more or less consisted of. It was Port and sherry sold in bulk to England. There they were blending it in with Spanish and Portuguese stuff and other products from Africa, and this is how we worked. Table wines were barely in existence. And our technology wasn't right. And I think the grape varieties weren't right. I think we had a really big problem there. This was the right time to come in with new technology and to improve the standard. I mean, 1961 was a time when you could really show your head and what you were going to be capable of.

Wolf, in those first three years were you only on sparkling wines with Kaiser Stuhl?

WB: Yes, the first three years only sparkling wines, plus Riesling. Never made a gallon of red wine in my life before, except blending it in England. Blending it from Bordeaux or from Burgundy for the importer. But it was my job to do all the sparkling wine production and Riesling. And I think we won the first awards with Riesling at the Royal Adelaide Wine Show. That was a highlight. What I mean by highlighted, is that it was obscene that the co-operative suddenly won some awards. You were not allowed to do that, because there were six of the seven family companies that controlled the total market. And they're all still alive. So if you came in as an outsider you were thrashed. You weren't allowed to have any success.

What did you bring to that Riesling style that was different and fresh?

WB: I think that what we really brought out was flavour, drinkability, freshness. We added some carbon dioxide, and one thing that was most important, we made sure that the wine didn't oxidise. Except for Leo Buring who was the master and Gramps Orlando [there were few others making these whites]. Buring and Orlando were the masters of destiny of white wine in this country. All other wines were affected somehow through either bad maturing or making. That was a great thing [for Kaiser Stuhl to get recognition]. And of course we also made late picking wine straightaway. This style of wine was very hard to sell but it gave the company some positive acceptance in the national wine shows.

Well, Wolf, come 1964 you become the first travelling winemaker in Australia, if you want to put it that way, since Leo Buring I think, from my records, and that would've been, oh, fifty years before—nearly fifty years before. About 1919. What set you off on that path?

WB: Once the contract was expired Kaiser Stuhl would not allow me to make any sparkling wines, pearl wines, or champagne type of wines, for three years. They thought that I would detrimentally affect their business. They gave me a contract and an air ticket to fly out to America because I had already been offered a job at the Institute in California. And I said, ‘If they’re so bloody anxious to get rid of me, I must be good. *(Laughter)* I think I’ll stick around here. I think I’m going to do something’.

And suddenly people came to me, when this all happened—I applied for a couple of big jobs but it wasn’t really the package which I wanted. A couple of the smaller wine companies came to me, and said, ‘Look, how about you come and do some work for us? But we don’t have enough of a job for you for the whole week’. This was \$2.50 an hour they couldn’t pay. You can imagine what the industry was like. I started, and from then onwards I had to really prove the pudding. That was the hardest road I think any man had to take on. It was probably my stubbornness. I said that I wanted to prove myself. I said, ‘Stuff them! I’m going to get there somehow’.

And then for seven days, with a little Volkswagen, I was cruising around Basedows, Woodleys, Jim Barry’s place. Then the Clare Valley co-operative. Tolleys winery. Bleasdale. You name it. You know, I was there for a couple of hours, a day, and a half a day. And it really rattled the wine shows, you know, for these little boys. And Normans. They won their first trophies.

There were a lot of anxious moments in my life because I knew that this wouldn’t get me anywhere. But at the same time, with the success coming their way, I was recognised. And I then made my own little parcel of wine in 1966. When I was going to the Grand Finals with the boys from the Barossa Valley, we stopped at Great Western. I went down to Bests and I bought myself a hogshead or two hogsheads of wine and I blended them in my first wine vintage. And I said to my compatriot companies, ‘Do you allow me to make a couple of tons of grapes and I can crush them here?’ This was all unheard of. They said, ‘You’re going to do something?’—you get

paid \$2.50 and you ask them to use their equipment. I mean, this [their negative ideas] was all bloody unreal. So my first vintage was 250 dozen—three thousand bottles—1966.

Where did you crush that, Wolf?

WB: I think that was crushed in—I think that would've been crushed at Darky Liebich's [Rovalley].

I was just going to say Rovalley.

WB: I think it was Rovalley. Rovalley helped me all the way along because I made them—by then the three year agreement with Kaiser Stuhl was over—I made them Charmane. The Charmane sparkling wine. And that became the number one seller in the State. His daughter's name was Charmane. So he helped me along to '67. And he bottled the '67—so there was a little bit more. 1500 cartons. And the boys helped me in Langhorne Creek with the grapes. They said, 'Oh, that's alright'. And I struggled along and made my wines. And then Tolley Scott & Tolley made me this offer in 1969 to become the General Manager of winemaking to convert their brandy operation into wine [production]. And I thought, 'Oh, that's a good job. Now I'm safe'.

Then in '69 I started, and then of course I made my wines at Tolleys—'69/'70 and '71. And I think this was one of the greatest success stories, that in three years I brought Tolleys to be the most successful red wine exhibitor in Australia. History will never repeat this thing because Tolleys had no equipment, they had no grapes, they had nothing. And everything had to come from innovation. Innovation was the whole thing. But in '72 they knocked on the door, and they said, 'Look, Wolf, are you going to work for us, or do you want to do your own wine?' I was stupid, stupid. I mean,

every other winemaker today does it, but because I was first—I did everything first—they didn't want me to carry on with my own little production.

I said to Grace Broad, my secretary (she came from Yalumba, by the way, 'Grace, you just hang on. There's a Board meeting on. Just hang on'. I'd go home for lunch, and I had to make some decisions. I phoned up Darky Liebich. Phoned up Jim Ingolby. I said, 'Look, I've got a pressure job here'. These guys, they're getting a little bit too smart for me. When I went back, I did it [quit] the typical Australian way (*Laughs*) — but then of course they realised that they've overstepped the mark. Because it was during the vintage. So I finished their vintage, I made my wine, and said, 'Now go jump -' With my own \$2,000 overdraft, I said that I'd go on my own.

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

So Wolf, you become really the first independent winemaker, if you like, going around. You've made the TR series famous all over Australia, and those of us who were lucky enough to drink it remember it just as superb red wine.

Did you always love the blending skills?

WB: I didn't have any choice because at the time when I was working for these small wine companies they didn't have any good grape varieties. They only had fortified grape varieties. Grenache, Mataro, Carignan, and all this type of thing. The premium varieties weren't there. So I had to do something extraordinarily different to master and counteract the big boys in order to succeed. This was my oak maturation, which I started off, where I said, 'No wood. No good'. But of course then the media fall over

me and said, ‘Blass’ wines, they’re good when they’re young. They’re only blended. He’s only a blender. He’s not a winemaker’. I mean, I went through every bloomin’ thing in this world. I was over six feet tall when I started! Have a look at me now. Now I can ride my own horses. *(Laughter)* This is how they’ve knocked me down over twenty bloody years. So I had to do something, and my idea was to get women to drink wine. And it had to be soft and smooth.

At the time our red wines were so heavy. They didn’t know how to make them. You put a spoon in, it didn’t fall. The spoon still stayed in the red wine. And they were selling the wine by telling the retailer, and the retailer told the consumer, you have to put the wine away, you wait for six/seven years and it’s alright to drink. And I thought that was lunatic. So this is when this blending came in. The combination of different varieties, combination of different regions to make this wine drinkable, oak maturation to give them this complexity, and drinkability became the key word. And this is why I was probably successful.

And I confused all of the judges! Because suddenly they thought that was the greatest thing, you know, since sliced bread was invented. And when I said I confused them, I certainly didn’t fool them. In simple terms, they always thought that my wines wouldn’t last. And that’s where I really fooled them. Because today you can open a bottle twenty-five years old and it’s still standing out like nobody’s business.

When I got into this red wine Langhorne Creek helped me. I loved the area. I didn’t like the South East. I still don’t like the South East and I stuck with Langhorne Creek and it’s become the second biggest grape growing district in Australia. So I must have been right in the first place.

And I didn’t want to confuse issues with Max Schubert. I knew that he was a great wine man. I thought that I’m going to make my style—soft, easy to drink—therefore less tannin. Max had a heavy tannin complex—he was concentrating on more of a Bordeaux style. Wait six/seven years before you open the bottles. Plus with Penfolds, for about ten/fifteen years in the 70’s and the 80’s, they never crossed our path because we made two different styles of wine. And I think that was the right decision to make.

Nobody copied. The only thing was that everybody copied me, in the end, because they started to make wines easier to drink, faster to mature. And probably I'm the one who's going to be blamed that you're now drinking one and a half year old red wines.

But the process of getting there [was tough]. The media—I have 54 big scrapbooks out of newspapers—how they have hammered me. They could never swallow one little fellow like me to knock the industry around in nine years out of ten, whereas no other wine company came close to us in red wine. Of course, I had good blokes. I mean, very, very good staff. Loyal staff. They're still there. This made a difference, of course. And we loved getting those trophies. That was a procession. *(Laughs)*

So was the first Jimmy Watson in '74—was that the beginning, Wolf?

WB: Yes, but that was not the beginning of winning. Not the beginning of winning. It was the first breakthrough that a totally independent, newcomer to the industry, and a small company, won this award. It'd never been done before. It was always going to Penfolds, Lindemans, Seppelts, Hardys, or somebody else like that—finished.

And then, you know that I was checked up on all the time. Each time we won a gold medal the Royal Show Society wanted to know where the wine came from, where the wine was stored. They thought, you know, that I was cheating. I was always under cross-fire. There was never a clean cut. And you always felt it. This happened in '75. It happened in '76. After I had won it three times—then I packed it all in, and I said, 'Now, where do we go from here?' And we won nine or ten Montgomery trophies, and I said to the Show Society (I wrote them a letter), 'Don't be so bloody foolish. Go around and look for somebody else. Don't annoy me every time. You come along trying to check up if the quantities are right, the qualities are right'.

But in the meantime we were going overseas. To me it was quite clear that overseas was the market. That this market wasn't good enough for us. Not good, I mean not big enough for the Australian wine industry. Brian McGuigan, me would have done more

for the export development in this country than any other individual person. Of course our company's profiting from this today. Selling 70% overseas and 30% at home.

This is Mildara Blass?

WB: No, the Wolf Blass products.

The Wolf Blass products?

WB: Yeah, the Wolf Blass products. You know, I was always interested to get out—for example, Oceania. We moved in to New Zealand. It was my first business. And I went over to Fiji, Noumea, then to Singapore. That was all in the earlier stages when nobody else really started looking around. That was the time when you knocked on the door and they shut it on you. They didn't keep it open. They shut it. Of course with my language they couldn't understand what I was saying anyway. *(Laughter)* This was an interesting time of development in the 70's.

And then of course I went into the Riesling—into the Riesling production—and that was a quick decision. The quick decision was made when I came back from overseas. I never made much white wine at all. Always concentrated on red wine. I came back from overseas, did some studying, had a look around, and I was invited to Singapore by the Overseas Trade Commission—I think it was the ambassadors or something who had a tasting of Australian wines. When I tasted them, I said, 'It's impossible that we're drinking such bad wines'. That was well into the 70's. You know, I had never really realised [this before]. you sit in and you do your own thing. And I thought to myself that I never had believed that we were making such unbalanced white wines. I phoned up John Glaetzer. I said, 'John, no bottling. We're going to add some grape juice—natural grape juice'. He had never heard of it. John didn't know. He said, 'Probably he's drunk again. Must be drunk'. *(Laughter)* I said, 'We will do a new

trick'. And then we did it. We came home, put this juice in it. Within three years Wolf Blass wineries sold 1.6 million bottles of Riesling in this country. Number one. Plastered everybody off the bloomin' earth. So that was a great achievement. I really enjoyed it. You know, Johnnie and me, up there, and our crew, we fired the bullets everywhere against a conglomeration of white winemakers.

Talk a bit about John, Wolf.

WB: Oh, he's a great guy. I knew his father and his mother. And when I was working at Normans as a consultant his father was working there. He always said, 'I've got two boys that want to get into the wine industry'. I said, 'Send them up to Roseworthy College'. 'Alright'. They went there. And soon I said, 'Look, John, you going to come with me? I'll teach you how to make wine'. And his other son, I sent him to Murray Tyrrell. I said, 'Murray, there's a bloke there, look after him. He's a good boy'. His name is Collin

And then he wanted to get overseas. I thought of John Avery in Bristol. Collin is a good bloke there. 'Give him a job'. And he went overseas, and John stayed with me all the way along. John is the rare material of loyalty, integrity and honesty, and I never questioned his integrity. He's just one of these very rare guys. Of course, now he's carrying a lot of cement bags on his shoulder, simply because I think they're overtaxing him. And in a big conglomerate operations there's no more personalities left. There's no boss left. There's no handshake. There's no nothing. I wouldn't work for a big group like this if you give me the money three times around. Because things have changed. I feel sorry for the young guys today. They've got no freedom.

That world of the Barossa in the 60's and 70's, Wolf, you made a lot of friends up there. I know you had a great friendship with Lehmann—Peter Lehmann—and there was lots of to-ing and fro-ing there. Would you like to tell some of the stories about your relationships with Lehmann and the famous peach blend?

WB: *(Laughs)* Oh, Peter was a funny guy. Course you know, Peter was always Mr unhappy guy. He always wanted to make a dollar. He never made any. Because before working up there at Saltram he was with Yalumba. Then he started to become a great guy with grape growers and in his relationship with the industry. Great hospitality.

And then, one day he fooled me. You know, he gave me some apple cider, and said it was a German Rhine Riesling. And we had these jokes constantly together. And I said, 'I'm going to do something to you bastards, too'. I said we're going to put some peach in red wine. Get some different flavour into Mataro. Mataro had a thin flavour.

And one of our girls, you know, had to throw the peaches onto a stainless steel meshed container. It all came down and we started fermenting it. And we made this wine, and put it up, you know, when it was all cleaned up. We did all this. Was all top secret. And we bottled it. Then, you know, we put it up for a blind tasting to Peter Lehmann—they all thought it was bloomin' absolutely out of this world—this flavour. Anyway, I gave them one back.

Peter was a lot of things. We nearly became partners, you know, at one stage when I started the bottling company. But his other partners never wanted to sign documents. They didn't want to sign documents. I said, 'Look, I'm not going to get myself involved in this'. And I'm very glad, you know, that Peter's success as a public figure has become very profitable. It's wonderful to see.

So with all your stirring, Wolf, one of the things that we know you brought to the industry is promoting it in a new and fresh way.

Now, you actually began that I think with some of the first Barossa—the early Barossa vintage Festivals, didn't you?

WB: Yes. I was declared the Fuhrer of the Barossa Valley. And I was working [to help them]—they were in big trouble. The Barossa Valley Vintage Festival was in big trouble. It was going backwards, you know, for the previous six years, so they had to make drastic changes. And the only way I think we could do it, was not by forming a big committee, but just to get two guys together and for them to work their guts out and to decide how to get a promotion going. And it was Jerry Galpin from Yalumba and myself, with our secretaries, started coming up with this idea of having this waggon—a full waggon of wine from all the wine companies and people associated with the Valley. I think it was valued at twenty thousand dollars or something like this.

And we made a key. Locked it all up in chains, and keys were distributed all around Australia. To all the media, all radio stations and television stations and everything else. The first person who found the right key and could open the lock on the chains would get all of the wine. And this was picked up everywhere. I mean, this was a great thing. You know, we had the Barons of the Barossa then, and everything else.

Funny part of it was that the first day someone found it and this thing went off. *(Laughter)* You know, somebody came down, unlocked the thing and, bang, here we went. So we had to put a second cart together in order—you know, for it to stay alive for the vintage festival. So that was a little bit of an expensive idea, but it was a great success. That was the turnaround to get the Barossa Valley back on its feet. And I had to thank both companies at the time to give us the time off to use our manpower to get the thing back on track again.

And then Windy Hill-Smith was also part of the art gallery. Suddenly we pulled in some heavyweights and everybody had suddenly to participate, and I think this helped to put some charisma back into the show.

Now, Wolf, there's that promotional side we've talked about. Now through the 1980's your products just got bigger and bigger and bigger. How did you see that time with all the export opening up? And how did you end up going public?

WB: The public tackled us quite clearly. I started getting nervous. The company got too big. I became very restless and said, ‘Where does it all finish?’ And I had this belief that if I went to the public, and was to be the majority shareholder, that life would go on for ever. And in ‘84 I decided that, yes, I would go public. And I think I was the first company to go public. I think I was holding 65% or something like this—65/70% at the time. We were oversubscribed, and I gave the offer to the retail trade. I didn’t go to the public. Public got very little. The retail trade. I wanted to get the retail trade on my side. That was a success. I think the decision was right. I know I was hauled down by the media once again. ‘Blass is reaping in the money. He’s running with the loot’. I could see the thing had to go bigger. There was a point where I realised you either go bigger or you go backwards.

I said to myself that I’m going to have a little bit of a relief. And I appointed a Managing Director, and I appointed some other staff. Without making too much fuss of this, it was a disaster. It didn’t work. And I had to go back. Hurry back from overseas where I was working on export development. I had to go back and had to get things into order. There was definitely something really going wrong.

And in 1989 we found that there was a pinch for the first time because the interest rates were 20%.

‘89?

WB: ‘89. There were the interest rates at 20% and we, for the first time, were wounded because we didn’t have our own vineyards. Because I had always said that I bought wine, blended wine and had a few of my own vineyards. But, suddenly, we had to pay high prices. The knife was right on me. And on my shareholders, and everybody else. And that was one of the hardest decisions, you know, at the time. How do we cope with this financially in order to keep the shareholders happy?

I was again overseas at the time. I was in Paris negotiating—I was smart enough. I had Seagrams as a distribution network in England. And I had Remy Martin in the East and Asia. And we had a distribution company. And we had a bottling company with Seagrams. So I was the first guy that I was very internationally minded.

Suddenly, the message came that the South Australian Brewing Company had bought Lindemans and Penfolds, and the whole group together. I nearly fell over. That was 36%. I said, ‘We’ll go. We’ll not survive. We’re not surviving now. Being a public company we can’t survive. When one company controls 36% of the market, bloody hell, we’re going to go’.

I flew straight back, went to Ross Wilson, knocked on the door and said, ‘Ross, which of the wine companies are you going to sell? Because we’re interested. We want them as a brand’. I had Quelltaler and Kanppstein at the time but that wasn’t big enough. We had some interest in New Zealand. That wasn’t enough. And he said, ‘Nothing’. I said, ‘You can’t keep it all going?’ He said, ‘Yeah. You’re not going to get anything’.

And at the same time, Ray King was on the doorstep. Ray King was at the same door. He said, ‘Mildara can’t bloody survive’. He talked to Ross. He said, ‘You’re going to sell something?’ He said, ‘Nothing’. (*Laughter*) So we both started talking to each other. We wanted to get a part—I said, ‘Just hang on, Ray. Don’t go up in the plane. Keep talking’. He said, ‘What you talking about?’ I said, ‘I’ve had enough’. That’s what I said. I said, ‘This thing is going to get too big for me’. Here we go. I said, ‘I’m tired’. I said, ‘Look, let’s keep talking’. So it was quite legitimate. So we said, ‘Alright let’s negotiate and settle something.’

My Board was against it. My Board didn’t want to hear anything of this nature. So we went down to the new hotel—the Grande Hotel. And at the Grande Hotel, the Wine Federation had a Board meeting. And Ray King and I were walking around in track suits in the morning. (*Laughter*) They said, ‘What are these two guys doing here?’ We were trying to work out what the situation was. That’s when we started putting things together. My Board took some convincing. But I said that I thought it was the

best thing—for the best interest of the wine company and for the best interest of the shareholders. I think I was quite ready to move sideways. There's only one bloody bloke can be the chief executive. And Ray said, 'Alright, I'm going to use you for export'. Then I was a major shareholder. Everybody said that it was a takeover. Couldn't have been a takeover, I was the biggest bloody shareholder.

There was another media bloody story that came on to me. I thought it was an amalgamation. But this word amalgamation, and joint venture, didn't exist. Today, everybody says amalgamation. But then, going back only ten years ago, it was different. That's how the two companies came together. And from then onwards the share price went from \$1.20, \$2.50, and climbing up and up and I realised that ten years down the gurgler, I was the Deputy Chairman.

(interruption)

We're ten years down the gurgler, and the share price is going up and up

WB: And the share price as indicated went then, from year to year, up in an unparalleled precision whereby we reached \$7.50. And [then something happened]—not out of the blue, because I was a Board member. The Board members were called in on a Saturday and on Sunday to attend a very special Board meeting in Melbourne. And even before I knew what could happen, I said, 'There's a takeover offer'. And I wasn't wrong. And they went up to \$7.75. Ted Kunkel, CEO of Fosters, phoned me up. He said, 'Look, Wolf, we need your support. Can you bloody show your hand first.' I said, 'I'd be delighted. It's fair and reasonable'. *(Laughs)* I said, 'It's the best thing for the shareholders'.

There was a little bit of resistance by William Grant, the Scotch people. They wanted a little bit more but you expect that from the Scotch! But it was all a handshake, and I think the takeover was a very, very smooth and a successful situation. And I was

retained as an ambassador for the company, still on the activities of export. Not domestic so much. That's probably why they've gone down. I'm quite sure that their domestic market's gone down because they've eliminated the personality and the character of Wolf Blass in this industry. I couldn't do it anyway. Export I think has been so far—I liked it, I enjoyed it, I made a lot of friends and I'm probably more better known now overseas than back home in the industry. It's coming now to a different time of my life. I think I have to look at a different lifestyle and the quality of life. Because running private companies at the same time, which I have been doing, is beginning to show that the 1934 vintage is ageing very rapidly. I think I have to look at the 'cork' very soon and might need to change my lifestyle. I think it has been pretty hectic. I enjoyed it but things are slowing up a bit.

Wolf, what's the biggest change you've seen? What are the biggest changes you've seen over the years?

WB: The unparalleled situation of having an industry which absolutely stagnated in the 80's, except for domestic market proceedings, to get the breakthrough, and having this luck on the side—lots of luck—that suddenly we had the opportunity to offer our wines on the international market. And had repeat offers by sheer consistency of our quality. That would be the most remarkable situation that noone in the industry could ever have foreseen what would happen over the next five years. And looking back to the early days, brands didn't mean a thing—they weren't calculated as assets. Today, the brand is an asset bearer. You have got an industry which is moving, at this point in time, with three hundred and fifty million dollar development on the top of where we already are, and we're driving an export from nowhere, probably 50% in a couple of years time. I think that's something.

The big problem which I see is that we haven't got enough foresight. And I don't think we've got enough intelligent people who have seen the setbacks in former years. Because what they have experienced is only running forwards. Being a German, we

have seen this in World War 1, and we have seen the World War 11. So it was a disaster. You're finishing up with a silver medal. We don't get gold medals for that.

Here I think you've got this big question mark. There is a strategy for twenty-five years but really internally, the people sitting on the top of these companies, they're only looking at carton sales, profit making, because they're public companies. They've got no heart. No feeling. I don't know how they're going to react when the crunch comes. Its not going to be easy in America. Not going to be easy in Europe, or in Asia. Suddenly competition is coming. I could not point to any one person, or company, except probably Orlando, who has got the product in the right place at the right time with the right formula. I think there's a lot of weaknesses surrounding us so that we talk up high prices, we talk up high quality, and we're talk up high volumes. But nobody has come back and asked, 'What's going to happen when things change? With which brand do we enter the market if there's going to be a surplus?'

This is going to come. I don't think most of the companies have looked at this. I personally think there could be a little bit of a scrap coming up for the industry, and some of these 1200 wine growers, and they might have to drink their wine themselves. Cheers!

Thank you, Wolf.