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Full transcript of an interview with

TONY DEVITT

on 26 July 2000

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

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OH 692/34 **TONY DEVITT**

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0H 692/34 TAPE 1 - SIDE A

NATIONAL WINE CENTRE, WOLF BLASS FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.
Interview with Tony Devitt in Perth on 26th July, 2000.
Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Well, Tony, just a little bit of background about yourself. Where and when were you born?

TD: 7th November, 1944.

In Perth?

TD: In Perth, yes.

And what were your family involved with?

TD: Both my parents were born on rural properties. My father near Narrogin and my mother at Pinjarra, but both their families for various reasons came back to the city. And so I was born a city slicker.

(Telephone interruption)

We were up to talking about your parents. Your father came from Narrogin and your mother came -

TD: That's right. From Pinjarra. They came to Perth and so I was born in Perth. They left the country when quite young so didn't have a practical background in farming themselves. But it so happened that after I finished my schooling I went to University and did agricultural science. I had developed an interest in agriculture, although I cannot provide a reason as to how my interest came about.
And when I graduated from University of Western Australia I moved into agronomy, doing pasture research. I developed an interest in wine quite independently. I suppose to my good fortune it was a family situation where we did, in fact, have wine at the table at celebrations. Christmas and things like

that. It wasn't a normal part of our day-to-day living, or anything like that. I can't say that I've got a strong family background in wine in any way, but we did have wine. And I suppose it was some of the more, say, popular styles of the day. The Rinegoldes and wines like that.

Barossa Pearl?

TD: Yes, a sort of first step into wine. So at least it was introduced into the family. But then I developed a particular interest in the subject.

How did you pursue it, Tony?

TD: I think there were a number of things that really just twigged. When I was at university most of our lectures were in broad acre agriculture. We did have a very small introduction to horticulture in the third year of our course. And the lecturer was Dr John Gladstones. And that would've been 1965. And at the end of 1965, in fact, was the year that he published a paper on the suitability of the south west for wine grape growing. So Gladstones obviously gave us an introduction to viticulture.

Also at the time—in fact, a couple of years before that, I started playing cricket at the university, and who was in my team but one Tony Mann. So I got to know Tony and his brother, Dorham, very well. And quite often after games we went to Houghton Wines to celebrate our victories.

Is Dorham, Tony's father?

TD: No, Dorham's his elder brother. Jack was the father. Dorham; Corin, whom you'll be meeting tomorrow as well; and Tony were three of the four Mann children. Tony was the one that I played a lot of cricket with, and I played mostly against Dorham.

So we went to Houghtons and I got to know Jack very well. He was always very generous. Had strong opinions about wine and about cricket, and whether you were interested in wine or not you probably heard about them. But I found it fascinating. So it was an interest that really grew independently of family I

suppose. When I did my honours year at university, my supervisor was Dr John Gladstones again. So there were a number of strong influences.
When I finished at university and came to work at the Department of Agriculture, I worked for a few years in pasture research. Some of the people that I worked with in the same area also had quite an interest in wine. When you consider that this is the late 60's, wine wasn't that popular in Australian society. But these fellows, some were a little older than me, and some were a lot older, had quite an interest in wine. And when I went and visited country projects we had a meal and we had wine, which was pretty unusual.

So there's a lot of influence coming there?

TD: Yes. Through personal associations and events that happened almost by chance. And I can remember going to a trip to Esperance which—I mean, Esperance?—back in the late 60's. One of the elder statesmen from the Department said to me, 'Son, besides agriculture, we're going to teach you a bit of culture'. And there was a hotel down there where he often stayed, and he organised with the licensee to make sure he had a reasonable stock of wine in the cellar, and we sat down and we tasted wines. So we enjoyed wine with our meal. It was something that I was very comfortable with.
To the point also that I started doing wine appreciation courses, at a basic consumer level. And I think the first one I did was down in Fremantle at Lionel Samson's cellars. And that's a very historic company. It was one of Western Australia's first companies. And Mel Jarvis, who I've mentioned to you before, in fact was the person who took those courses down in the old cellar there. I can tell you some stories about that old cellar, too, that are very interesting. And I did that course, and loved it. And wanted to do more courses. And at that time what was to become the Wine Education Centre, as it is now, started a lot of wine courses in Western Australia. In fact, I even lecture for them now. I went and did a primary course there with them, with a lady named Jenny Kosisek. Her husband was the State Manager for Seppelt at the time. She's still down south, I think.

Anyway, I really enjoyed that course and did pretty well in the little exam that we had. And they had an advanced course and I went and did that, and I think I got dux of the class. I really was getting pretty excited about all this wine business. That would've been in—well, this year they say it's the thirtieth year. I'm pretty sure I did the first course in—must've been '71 then. I did the second one in '72 and I got to a point where I thought that I wanted to get into this professionally, but there weren't any jobs here. I was working in pasture research, and there was Bill Jamieson and Dorham Mann working for the Department in viticulture and that was it.

Anyway, lo and behold, Dorham—this is in October '72—announced that he was going to go and work for Sandalford Wines. Leave the Department and work for a wine company. I heard about this, and I thought, 'Gee, that's a job I'd like'. And I went and spoke to our then Director of Agriculture. In fact quite a bit of this information is in Mike Zekulich's book about my early history so if you want to again cross reference it, it would be there.

I spoke to the then Director who was a good friend then, and still is. He was very helpful to me. I told him about wanting to move into the wine industry here. He suggested that it wasn't such a good idea because it was an agricultural backwater, at the time, but I was pretty determined. Dorham left and his job was advertised. I applied. Went to interview. Got the job and, of course, joined Bill Jamieson in March 1973.

And part of the deal was that, to have me trained, they sent me to Roseworthy to do the winemaking course, which was particularly generous at the time I thought. And particularly sensible. Sure I was the lucky one to have that opportunity but I would, certainly in terms of jobs of that level of specialisation, think it's important to have that sort of training. And I certainly valued it very much, and I thought it was a very wise decision by this agency, and I must admit that I respected that and I really worked very hard when I was away at that course.

And Bryce Rankine hadn't got there by that time, had he?

TD: No.

1976, I think.

TD: That's right. I was there '74 and 5. I got to know Bryce pretty well, in fact. And I must admit when I was at Roseworthy it always staggered me that Roseworthy was out near Gawler. The college was out there with its little winery. And in Adelaide you had the Australian Wine Research Institute with Bryce and all that brain power. And ne'er the twain did meet. I mean, there was no relationship between Roseworthy and the Wine Research Institute. I thought that this was very strange because, you know, the Wine Research Institute then was very effective, as it still is now. When you think of the work and the relationship that Bryce had with the industry, it was an extraordinary contribution. And the people before him—Fornachon and people like that. So I found that quite extraordinary.

I was a little bit older, too, than most of the students because I'd already been working for six years. So I probably had a slightly different attitude to it all. But again, I suppose the overriding thing was that I'd been sent over here by this agency so I was going to make every post a winner. And I pledged to myself that I'd visit every wine region and every winery in Australia while I was over there, and I just about did I think. Couldn't do it these days. So many more wineries. But I really got around and worked pretty hard, and I got dux of the course and got first class honours and I was pretty pleased about that. In fact, Sir Mark Oliphant, who just passed away, handed me my certificate. I was pretty chuffed about that because, back in February '76 when that happened, he was quite a man in those days. His reputation, of course, had been well and truly developed by then.

He was just a delightful man.

TD: Yes. Tremendous man. I mean, it was a very brief meeting but I was pretty impressed and in awe of this great scientist. Well, he lived to a great age.

And I made a lot of great contacts there, and really got to know a lot of people and a lot about the industry I suppose, which I'm really pleased about. That networking has been something I've valued all my life. I can tell you a few other stories—I can chat about a whole lot of interesting things about that time. In fact, I drove back and forward to Roseworthy in those days. I did eight trips across the Nullarbor, which was an unsealed road in those days.
And Bill Crappsley was over there as well. And Bill has just recently resigned from being the winemaker at Sandalfords, and he's gone out privately. He was also winemaker at Evans & Tate for many years. Bill actually started his life in the wine industry as far as I know (you need to talk to Bill about this, and he's got a story to tell) at Houghtons as a cellar hand, and then he went east and worked at Redman and d'Arenberg. I caught up with Bill in the Barossa at Basedows in '74. Him being a Western Australian, and me being a Western Australian, people over there didn't know that Western Australia existed, let alone that it had a wine industry, or made wine, or had people even remotely interested in wine. And that created quite an interest at the college.
The fact that I got into the college is also another story, too, because the place was full. It was minister to minister collaboration that actually got me into the college.

Really?

TD: Squeezed me in, yes.

Just thinking. In '73, Basedows were still making the old imperial flagons with the reds in them.

TD: Could've been. That's testing my memory.

They were. Because I was selling them. ***(Laughs)***

TD: Okay. There we go.

Very famous wine.

TD: Well, I must admit—I'm sure Bill made a few famous wines when he was there and, as I said, I actually caught up with him in '74.

And Bill at that stage was consulting from afar to John Tate and John Evans, who started Evans & Tate. And also with my cynical student mates who didn't believe that Western Australia were in the wine industry at all, I arranged with Bill that I would get wine sent over from Western Australia. And I put on tastings for my fellow students at Basedows with Bill. And we did this at regular intervals through our course and it was really great. And of course, then Bill came back to Western Australia and worked for Evans & Tate and I continued on my merry way.

So that was a good introduction to Bill, and to Evans & Tate, and to the wines of Western Australia. Quite a few wines in fact. And, again it strengthened my bond with the other students, a number of who have really made their mark in the Australian wine industry.

Another interesting thing I noticed when I drove over on my first to South Australia was in early 1974. I was driving through Clare and I was looking at these grape vines, and I thought, 'This is terrible. These vines have got no leaves on them. Funny little bunches. Looks like they've had a bushfire through there'. And I looked and I thought, 'Hang on. There's no fire. There's no burning anywhere'. And I had to ask somebody what was the problem with these vines. And it was downy mildew. And 1974 was a terrible downy mildew year. After years of not seeing it, it caught up with everybody and just devastated a fair whack of the South Australian wine industry.

And I can remember to this day standing in Bill's cellar at Basedows with a cylinder of grape juice with a hydrometer in it. It measured five point two baumé. In other words, it had virtually no sugar and no anything much. I'm not even sure what Bill did with it to this day but it was -

That bad?

TD: It was that bad. And that was my first experience with this terrible disease called downy mildew. And of course, we now have it over in Western Australia. It arrived a couple of years ago. But up until then we'd never seen it over here.

So it was quite interesting. I mean, the rest of Australia had quite a bit of downy mildew.

Yes. The Lower Hunter gets it pretty badly, too.

TD: Yes. Various years. Some years worse than others – it depends so much on the weather.

Being at Roseworthy was fantastic. I had a good time there for a whole lot of reasons. Very positive reasons. And even at times Tom Cullity (who planted Margaret River's first vineyard in 1967) wrote the odd letter to me. Comments and notes of how he was going, also questions. There were a lot of people I really am most thankful for knowing them and their friendship and the help that they gave me. I'll try and mention a few of them. Tom's interest in finding out things helped me to find out things. And other people like Kevin Cullen, who always was good to have a discussion with. And a lot of the guys up in the Swan Valley. Certainly Jack Mann was fascinating.

I remember when I got back here I made many visits to the Swan Valley—in spite of all the many questions I got asked from all these new people at Margaret River. I remember one day I had to go to Houghtons to deliver some written information to a new winemaker who'd just started there. A fellow called David McNamara. Because Jack had really finished. I think his last vintage there was 1972 but Jack still worked in the winery on a consulting basis.

I went out there about nine o'clock in the morning and handed this paper to David. And, of course, Jack and I knew each other so well through the cricket connection. We got chatting and Jack said, 'Can you spend some time out here? I'm doing some blending of Amontillado sherries today'. And I thought, 'Wow. Opportunity'. So I grabbed it.

I spent the whole day there with Jack, tasting an immense range of sherries of great age. I mean, well, this is what? Mid 70's. Some of these wines would've been decades old and I wouldn't be too sure how old some of them would've been. But just extraordinary wines. And tasting them with Jack, and Jack

telling me about them, and how he made them, and the characteristics. It was just fantastic. And that was virtually the whole day, was just doing that, and it was just brilliant.

In fact, I was for many years a member of Swan Valley Vintners, which is still going, and visiting Houghtons on occasions, and Jack would bring out some great wines. And I can remember particularly one liqueur wine of the late 40's that we had. And Dorham will tell you exactly what wine it was. I think it was '47, from memory. A liqueur Muscat. This would've been in 1973.

And on one of my trips from Roseworthy to Rutherglen I ran into Bill Chambers, who again is a great friend and a great contributor to the wine industry. Not only from a production point of view but very much in wine judging. Quite an icon in wine judging over many years. And I ran into Bill in his old winery, as it was. It's been modernised since then. And I talked about my meeting Jack Mann and tasting some of his great wines, and his '47 Muscat, and Bill said, 'Wait here, son'. And he went out the back and brought out this bottle, and got a tiny little glass, and tipped the bottle up and hit it like a tomato sauce bottle, and this thick viscous liquid dropped into the glass. And I licked it out of the glass. It was a dark khaki greeny-brown colour. And it was an 1890 Muscat. So Bill showed me a really old wine.

Those sorts of experiences got me really excited about wine and I suppose I developed a real passion.

Just a question about Jack Mann, Tony. My understanding of his contribution is that he was probably one of the great prophets for table wines in Australia at a time when they weren't very—neither profitable, nor well liked.

TD: Well, he certainly was. And again, you will get more information when you talk to Dorham—Houghton White Burgundy, I think Jack developed the style in the 30's. Jack won, at some stage or other, every trophy or championship in Australia at the time. From a little winery in Western Australia with a whole range of wines. Certainly a lot of fortified wines which he was very adept at. But also for a lot of table wines.

There are still a few bottles of Jack's wines around—in fact, I have a very small number and I'm sure Dorham still has quite a few. I still have table wines made by Jack that are still sound and wonderful wines to drink. And, yes, he certainly had a strong influence in keeping table wines to the fore at a time when it wasn't vogue at all. Consider the influence of Houghton White Burgundy, going back all that time, and a great range of red wines.

So that's Jack. And you've been talking about some of the experiences with him in the winery, Tony.
Early 70's, too, you and your family begin to look in the south west, didn't you?

TD: Yes. My family had a small beach-front property. In fact, I think my mother got it through the family in the early 1950's. Or maybe even before that. As a family, my mother and father and my brother and sister went down in the early 1950's, and for twenty-odd years we just went down there for holidays, and we fished and swam.
As we got older, of course, we went less and less down there, and we had other things to do. I went to Roseworthy and got really fired up about getting into the wine industry, and Margaret River was just starting. In my holidays, between my two years at Roseworthy, I came back to Western Australia and spent the whole time talking to the family about it, and suggested I'd love to find some land down there that we could one day grow grapes on.
So my holiday task was to do that. I went down and I looked at properties. All sorts of properties. Looked at dozens and dozens of properties. And most of the ones that I saw in the price range that I was looking at anyway, I didn't think were suitable. Today, I'd still say that they wouldn't be suitable in terms of soil type and aspect and so on.
The estate agent that I was dealing with said, 'Look, I have another particular property which is a bit more than what you're talking in terms of price but it's worth having a look at'. I said, 'Sure, I'll go and have a look at it'. So late one evening I went to this property, and it was basically a paddock—229 acre paddock—that was behind another part of the farm. It had no direct road

access. The access was through the farm that owned that property. But just this particular paddock was for sale at the time.
And I drove through the property into this particular paddock and looked at the slopes and the trees and all this sort of thing. And I thought, 'Wow! This is just tremendous'. In fact, I only saw probably less than half of the property, and what I'd seen of it, I thought that this is tremendous. This is just what I'm looking for.
So I went back to our little place that night and sat down and did some numbers, and scratched my head, and all that sort of thing. And spoke to the estate agent the next day, and said, 'I saw that property and it looks just great but the price -' And he said, 'Look, the owner is in the room next door and he's prepared to drop the price. If you're interested I'll go and have a chat to him'. So he went and had a chat and he came back to me, and the price that he wanted was within $2,000, all up, of what I thought was what we could afford to pay for the property. And let's say that it was a fair bit under $200 an acre, which at the time was quite a price.

Probably double what it had been getting.

TD: Well, prices for that sort of land then, from memory, were certainly in the 150 sort of dollars an acre, and maybe a little bit more. This was in that sort of ball park, at the high end of the scale. I just said, 'Quick! Where's a phone?', and I rang my family—because I had to leave virtually the next day to drive to the Hunter Valley where I was doing the vintage during my course.
And spoke to the family, and said, 'Found the property. Can I put an offer in?' Which I did do. Put the other place on the market immediately with the same agent—the beach cottage—and got in the car and drove across to the Hunter, basically. *(Laughs)* And my family finalised the sale—both the house, and also purchasing the property. So therefore the paddock which became Ashbrook, the first part of the land, was purchased in—well, I saw it in January 20, I think it was, in 1975. We bought it in '75, and I never saw it again until the

following year, 1976, when I came back from Roseworthy. And we planted our first vines in September '76.

So Tony that's quite a large piece of land for that area at the time when a lot of the other vineyards that were being put in were really on reasonably small properties.

TD: Yes, most of the properties in that area were soldier settlements. A lot of them ranged between 110 and 160 acres generally. And in fact subsequent to that we bought another piece of land of 100 acres. We paid a bit more for that. And then we bought another piece of land of 170 acres that we paid even less for, believe it or not, than the first purchase per acre. It was totally uncleared. And so we have now 500 acres down there, of which 40 is planted at the moment. We're going to plant a little bit more this year. But it's still a small business and—yes, we have a reasonable chunk of land in what is the Willyabrup Valley.

And Tony, how did that begin to develop? Could you talk to me a little bit about choosing vine stocks?

TD: Yes, certainly. Well, as I said, I didn't see it for another year, and we decided that it was a piece of property that we could've planted vines or not. Could've just enjoyed it. It was really a very pretty piece of land. And in fact, my parents wrote to me and said that the bit that I hadn't seen was even more attractive than the bit I had seen, so to speak. So I was keen to see all that. Anyway, we made the decision to plant vines. And by now my brother had come back from being overseas.

So what's your brother's name?

TD: Brian. And he was very interested as well so his support was really important. Even in those early days, and certainly since then he's become an integral part of the business because he manages the property and he lives down there full time. We'll talk a bit more about Brian later. I'd like to, anyway.

So he was keen. And he had a science degree in organic chemistry. Also did a teaching diploma, and eventually ended up teaching down there. Although he taught up here first.
We decided we'd plant in '76. So what vines do we plant? I can remember one night standing in a shower down there and thinking—going through a whole list of varieties and coming up with many too many.

Now, was this based on personal preference, or a bit more than that with some of the things that the Cullens and the others had been finding out? Bill Pannell and Tom Cullity.

TD: Well, it was really interesting because the two varieties that were probably planted most in the south west at that stage were Riesling and Cabernet.

Yes, exactly.

TD: They were considered to be the two premium varieties. Let's plant Riesling and Cabernet. Now, by '76, Bill Pannell had planted Semillon and Chardonnay, and Cullen's had planted Chardonnay -

And Sauvignon Blanc by that time.

TD: - and Sauvignon Blanc probably as well. And I was just thinking—I probably got a bit of an idea about varieties as well in my Roseworthy course in terms of what was hot and what was not. Or what was starting to become so. So we initially planted Cabernet Sauvignon, which was the red of choice for most people down there. So that wasn't a terribly difficult decision. Chardonnay and Semillon.
I also had some sort of sympathy for the Bordeaux trilogy, let's say. Cabernet Franc and Merlot. So early on we also planted Cabernet Franc and Merlot because I saw the red as being a blended wine. And we still do. And we make one red. A Cabernet Sauvignon with Cabernet Franc and Merlot. Although we have subsequently, just last year, planted Shiraz. But as far as I was concerned that was the red. People had planted Pinot Noir down there, and I—no disrespect to my colleagues who've made some good Pinots in that area.

I don't think Margaret River is ideally suited for Pinot. In spite of the fact that there's been some good wines.

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

So, Tony, you were choosing the grapes.

TD: So getting the red was not difficult. And Semillon and Chardonnay certainly seemed to be performing down there quite well so that was the basis of our whites initially.
But also, and I think Dorham Mann at Sandalfords would've had some influence in this, we also very early on planted Verdelho because it made some great wines in the Swan. What would it do in a cooler area?
So Verdelho and a little bit of Sauvignon Blanc came next. We didn't plant Riesling. But the first commercial wine we made in 1979 was, in fact, Riesling, which we'd bought from a neighbouring property. Our vines had not really produced enough fruit at that stage.

That was '79?

TD: That was '79. The first wine we made in '79. We made a bit from our own young vines and never commercialised it. We just made it to see how it turned out. The first commercial wine, we bought Riesling from a nearby property and made three—no, we just made one. First year we made one Riesling. And then the next year, 1980, we made a number of commercial wines from our own fruit. Semillon, Cabernet, and also we bought the Riesling.
In 1980, we also bought some Malbec from Frankland River. Because my idea right from the start with our red was to put it in wood for two years and then bottle for two years before we released it. And we never released a red of our own until 1984. So we had to get some red to sell, and we got this Malbec

from Frankland River, which tided us over. And I was pretty pleased with the wines. We made two wines from that.

So you and your brother making it? Or you alone, Tony?

TD: My brother and I, we worked together. We were both working in Perth. Myself here and Brian was teaching at Kent Street. We went down religiously every weekend from the beginning of 1976.

Now what sort of equipment did you have? I guess from your Roseworthy training you knew what you needed. So was it just basic or what you could—second-hand?

TD: We got a second-hand tractor from the guy we bought the farm from, and most of the rest was muscle. The rest of it, digging all the trellis posts in and everything like that, that was real physical labour.
In the winery—we built a mudbrick winery and that was quite a task in itself—we used some old export tanks. The old Emu Wine export tanks.

Did you now?

TD: Yes.

While it was closed, eh?

TD: Yes. Houghtons had a whole lot of them over here because it was part of the deal. Of course, Houghtons were then taken over by Hardys.

Yes.

TD: That was fascinating story in itself as well. How that all happened. How things happened and how things didn't happen. Robert Holmes á Court was interested in getting Houghtons as well.
So we got twelve of those 500 gallon insulated stainless steel tanks. Lined them up in the winery. We built the building to take more conventional tanks but we didn't have any money to put those in. So we got these tanks. We

bought a little crusher, a basket press. We got the basic gear but it was all pretty small stuff. And off we went and we made our wines.

And bringing yeast in, or wild yeast? What were you -

TD: No, we used cultured yeast. I must mention another thing here, too. In 1979 we didn't have a winery. We made our one tank of Riesling in Cullen's winery. We put one of our tanks over there and they let us use their crusher. And again, the generosity of the Cullens was fantastic. And we made our first wine in 1979 in the Cullen's winery. Our winery was ready for the 1980 vintage.

Yes, Di actually told me that.

TD: Oh, good. Good. Fantastic. And again, there's probably more we can talk about that. But again, it was just the sort of -

Camaraderie.

TD: Yes, camaraderie and the generosity. When you think back, it was fantastic.
Did Di tell you the story about the binder twine?

Yes. It was in the Dalgety's warehouse next to the 24D. Right?

TD: That's right. That's a good story. And there's lot of others. I'm sure I'll think of more of these little things.
But anyway, so we made the wine. Then we were backward and forwards doing various things we had to do. Anyway, 1980, we made our own wine with our very rudimentary equipment.
Just going back. I can remember selling the first wine. We hand labelled it on the floor of the lounge room. We had this little cottage down here. It's still there. My wife and I stay there now on our regular visits. And we actually sold the wine off the back verandah of this little cottage. People came in and bought it. Because back in those days there weren't that many wineries down there, of course. (We were number 10, there are now 60.)

And anyway, we got our gear and made our wine. And I suppose the winery's grown and the gear's grown, so has the size, but it's still a small winery, of course. We have a philosophy that we want to stay small.

So what are you crushing every year? About 70 tons?

TD: No. At the moment 120 tons is where we're at, and we're probably looking at getting up to something between 150 and 200 tons—that's the sort of size we're looking at at this stage. And I hope we can continue to be successful at that. And this last year was our 22nd vintage. So I suppose history will have us that we've been there a fair while.

Yes. In terms of the area, you certainly have.

TD: Seen lots of changes, yes. Which has been pretty interesting.
Our wine business is based on a fairly mixed range of markets. We sell probably about 20% or so at cellar door/mail order. At the moment our biggest national market's in Sydney. Perth is probably next. Melbourne is good, and growing. Queensland, we've just started there. On a regular basis we've sold a bit of wine there but we've now got an agent there. Hopefully that will be significant for us. Adelaide is coals to Newcastle. It's the most difficult market in Australia to crack unless you're in South Australia. It's a very hard market. So we're not really selling much there at the moment. And we export 10-15% of wine, mainly into south east Asia and other parts of Asia. Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, little bits and pieces. Singapore's a really important market. And at various times we've sold wine to the UK and North America.

I've seen Ashbrook in Singapore.

TD: Yes, you certainly—

It's there everywhere.

TD: I hope you would've, yes. We've got good agents there.
So I suspect with the change in the industry, with a lot more wine coming onto the market, that Australia will be exporting a lot more of its wine. But for little

wineries like us we may in fact be exporting less, in some ways. We may have to—I don't know. We'll see. It'll be quite interesting. I'm certainly keen to see our cellar door develop more if we can do that. Even with the competition around us. But I think that that may be the way it goes.

Tony, going back to the origins of Ashbrook, could you talk to me a little bit—did you have problems? Were there basic problems with the natural environments or the creatures, or whatever? Or did you have a relatively good run?

TD: I think, like everybody, we had little barriers to overcome. And I reckon with new wine areas you don't start to see the problems until you've been there for a while. When things get to know that you're there, they start to get interested in you.

Now, let's see some of the major problems. I think for the area, and Ashbrook to some extent, a lot of people went there with the idea that great wines are not made with irrigation, so we won't irrigate. They don't irrigate in Bordeaux, so why do we irrigate here? I think a lot of vineyards showed stress—water stress—because we had some very dry summers, and we still do obviously. And I think that people learnt that for vines to perform well they need to be functioning, and they need food and water to do that. It's good to have irrigation here as an insurance against that, and certainly to establish vines irrigation made a hell of a difference. So after a few years we realised that we just had to start irrigating, and we did, and we irrigate just about everything now. When we need to. That was one thing that we had to overcome, was that idea—that sort of mindset.

So where are you drawing your water from for that?

TD: We have a couple of dams on the property. One's near a creek line and one's just near a seepage area. And they're pretty well self-replenishing. Yes, it's all underground. Not underground, subsurface water. Underground water in that area is pretty salty.

I've been told that.

TD: You can be lucky. But in most cases, it's pretty salty. So certainly I would suggest to anybody planting, irrigation is something you need—have access to water.

Nutrition. Thought about fertilising vines, felt we probably shouldn't have to. The old pasture country got a bit of a 'super' history and so on. But of course, we've now realised that highly weathered gravels are amongst the most infertile soils on earth. And like everybody else, we had some pretty strong deficiencies show up. And one of my colleagues here spent a lot of his life working on vine nutrition. That's his publication there, *Fertilisers for Wine Grapes,* which is, I'd say, probably nationally is one of the best publications on vine nutrition there is. And certainly he made a significant contribution. A fellow called Barry Goldspink, who still works with us. And we certainly realised that we had to provide nutrition. And again, that was a change, and we've all understood the importance of that.

Strong winds in Spring. We learnt about those and the damage that they cause to, particularly, early bursting varieties. So we know a lot more now about where to plant certain varieties and when to prune certain varieties to try and slow down bud burst. Particular varieties like Chardonnay, and to some extent Riesling. That was an issue for us, and still is if we get a nasty Spring storm. It can cause all sorts of damage.

Birds. Amazing silver-eyes. They really got to know about the grape vines -

I was waiting for that.

TD: - very quickly. And I think the population dynamics of silver-eyes have changed dramatically since vineyards have been in the area. They tended to breed in the coastal scrub. Numbers increased. Summer came, it got pretty hot and most of the birds died out. Went back to something normal, and then bred up. Back and forward, back and forward. Went to the forest for their food during the flowering of the red gums and things like that. But then grapevines came along and filled in a bit of a gap—a hard gap—for them. So they found

vines as a food source. And I think the population of silver-eyes down there now is greater than it's ever been.
In years of great red gum flower, and good flowering in the bush, they stay out of the vines. But inevitably at some time in most vintages they'll come in, and nets are basically the only way you can keep silver-eyes out of vineyards properly. And in fact, I've seen silver-eyes actually divebomb nets to try and get through them to the grapes. I mean, physically BOOM! Really go for it. And if you have a hole that big, you know an inch and a half in diameter, they'll just go through it. They're amazing. They need that moisture and that energy. In fact, the Ag Department, with contribution from the industry down there, funded a research project by a fellow with the interesting name of Ian Rook to study silver-eyes. He wrote a very good paper. And I think people have got great understanding about the problem due to silver-eyes.
Other problems. Yes, well, of course, we have the normal fungal diseases and a few of the insects. Better off than most. We have to contend with those but that's just been a case of learning about those. And I think most of us do. We use guinea-fowls as our insecticide. And they're very good against garden weevil and grasshoppers.

They're terrific.

TD: Fantastic. Which is handy. Keeps the chemical inputs down as well. I think with respect to fungal diseases we learnt a lot about canopy management and general vine management, and that's made life a lot easier. But again, the environment of Margaret River, as suitable as it is for grape vines, it also is suitable for some of the fungal diseases. So we've had to be, you know, very mindful of that. And vineyard management is just such an important part of the whole mix. Because that's where your winemaking resource is.

And, Tony, what about the locals? How did they greet you, having lived down there off and on for probably twenty years previously with your beach house?

TD: The beach house was a little removed from here—the beach house was at Guindalup, 20 or 30 k's north of Willyabrup. So we knew a number of people down here but probably not enough to say that we had a lot in common with them at the time. And at the time we were also people who were coming down from the city. We were absentee owners. We did farm as well. We did run cattle as well. So I suppose that helped a little bit. Got to know a few of the farmers through that. We probably didn't get it as much in the neck as some of our other earlier colleagues, who were seen by the locals as being—oh, probably mostly crazy. And I think they got a pretty hot reception in some cases. We were probably treated with a degree of askance, I suppose, just because it was something so different to the normal activities. And I suppose as the area has changed down there, there have been issues over the years that have tended to get up the traditional people's nose a little bit—or the local people who have been here for a long time. But I think that's gradually changed as people have changed. Generations have changed. And the vineyards have provided.

I mean, really it's been the economic driver of the south west of Western Australia. It really has been. I mean, I can talk a lot about that, too, in terms of the changes that have occurred in some of those things. Because I think it's had a real impact. And I don't think that a lot of people really understand the impact that it's had on those regions. And I can tell you when I was at university learning about economics and about rural Western Australia, my lecturer wrote papers and talked about the poverty of the south west of Western Australia. It was nationally one of the poorest regional centres in Australia. Soldier settlement. Dairy farms for butter fat production. Not even domestic milk. I mean, it was just hopeless. And so many people left properties and walked off farms. No power and water and this sort of business. Kids with no shoes. I mean, it was unbelievably depressed.

And when you see what the wine industry, and the allied industries that have come in with it—I mean we can't take all the credit but certainly it was the big driver initially. Got things moving. You know, I think it's made a hell of a

difference. Sure, some people don't like the thought of progress but progress will occur, and must occur. It's got to be planned right. That is still an issue. No doubt about that. I'm a little concerned about some things but other things I think have been fantastic for the area.
But, yes, we got away fairly scot-free, I suggest.

Well, Tony, would you like to talk a little bit about your family's involvement with Ashbrook over the time and how that's gone?

TD: Yes, well, gosh. I suppose that's been -

I mean, it is family -

TD: Absolutely. It has been family and it's been—well, it's been Ashbrook. It's quite significant. In fact, the name Ashbrook—it's a funny story to write, I suppose. My mother may be somewhat embarrassed by all of this. But she was the one who invented the name. 'A' stands for Anthony, which is my first name. 'S' is Susan, my sister. 'H' is—my mother's and father's christian names both start with 'h'. And the 'B' is my brother, Brian. His second name, and now his eldest son's name is Richard. The two zeros are sort of the amount of money that was just going to get poured into the place. So, on the end of whatever we thought we were going to put in there. And the 'K' is Kitching, my mother's maiden name. So that's Ashbrook.
The other thing about Ashbrook, also, is that it's a very soft name. It's an easy name to market. It's not a complicated name for people to say. It's also the front of the alphabet. In fact, there's been a few others that have gazumped us with other a's with second letters earlier in the alphabet. We almost thought of spelling Ashbrook with two a's. To start with, anyway. So that is where Ashbrook Estate came from. And on the labels we have a heraldic golden ash tree. That's our sort of icon. And that's the way it is.

It looks very nice.

TD: I've got some labels in my bag that I got for another purpose. So that's how Ashbrook came about.

Family involvement. Well, I suppose my mother and father have always been tremendously supportive, and still are, and still keep a close interest on the place even though they're not so day-to-day involved in it any more. And they visit occasionally, of course, and as I said, are very interested in what's going on there.

My sister, she spent many years overseas. And when a lot of this development was going on she was overseas but she's certainly been supportive. And she's not, again, directly employed by the business but certainly assists on occasions when the opportunity arises. But, again, we have had her support.

My wife, Marnie, certainly has been very much involved in it. Not so much nowadays but for quite a while in our earlier times together. I suppose that was part of the deal. She got me, she got Ashbrook. And she spent many weekends down here with me and really ran the cellar door for quite a while on weekends. She's been a great support to me. Again, nowadays, she's not so much involved in the running day to day.

And then you get to Brian and Carol, his wife. Carol was Western Australia's first woman Rhodes scholar, and actually there's a story there to tell as well. Probably going to run out of time tonight. But she was studying at Oxford at the time. And of course, Brian and Carol actually got married during her studies, which is almost impossible.

Not the done thing.

TD: Not the done thing. Had to get permission. And they got married on the Sunday and she went back to Oxford on the Monday. So I think they saw each other a year later sort of thing. *(Laughs)* But Carol and Brian have lived there a lot of their married life. I'm just trying to think when Brian went down there full time teaching. I'll have to check that. And raised their family there. They've got four kids who are all up in Perth now.

Carol, again, the support has been fantastic, and she's still involved. She being down there, can't avoid not being involved day to day, and amongst raising a family and other activities—she's on the Board of Western Power and South-

west Development Commission. She's not an idle lady in any way, shape or form. So she's obviously been involved a lot, and still is day to day with a whole range of things. Probably in a supportive role for Brian more than having definite tasks to do in terms of the vineyard or the winery. She doesn't get so much involved in those things—on a specific day to day task thing. But, again, is there to help if need be.

Brian. Yes, well, I suppose if we weren't able to work together as we have, it wouldn't be. In our early years we just went down there every weekend and developed Ashbrook on a weekend basis and holidays. I suppose both of us had sporting careers that were pretty important to us at the time, and I suppose to some extent there was a transition between that and Ashbrook because you can't play A grade cricket on a weekend when you're down at Ashbrook. So our careers in sport were—well, we were getting older anyway and maybe they would've retire for other reasons, but certainly that affected our careers a little. But we went down there for years and years. And I still do. And Brian, of course, taught down there. And eventually the business got to a situation where he could retire from—or resign from the teaching and take up full time in the business. That's been his livelihood for many years now.

Yes, we just worked together doing it. Doing everything really. I mean, he's down there managing. He's much more involved on a day to day—on the property managing the vineyard, the cattle and the winery. I look after the books and do all the export. He looks after the domestic wine sales. So we've shared duties. And we both spend a hell of a lot of our time on it. I have a job here, of course, but my nights and weekends see a reasonable amount of Ashbrook involvement.

Tony, with the wine itself, did you actually consciously plan a style?

TD: Yes, I've got some philosophies about it. Very much so. We certainly did. With respect to white wines, I'm a great believer that as white wines are made from grapes, you therefore try and show varietal character. Now, that's not to say that people who make blends won't make excellent wines but I just believe

that the varieties we've chosen—and we now have Riesling in the vineyard, too, by the way. We planted our own Riesling some years ago. We're one of the few left in Margaret River that make Riesling considering that it was showed the style of things to come to some extent. And in fact, our Riesling last year won (we don't show our wines normally, and I'll talk about that probably another time) top Riesling in Western Australia from a particular tasting, which we're pretty chuffed about. I think Margaret River makes great Rieslings. But of a particular style.

But I believe with the varieties we've got down there, they're all considered premiums. Chardonnay and Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc Riesling, Verdelho. All have strong characters that are distinctive. And I believe Margaret River shows those characters, along with the Clare/Watervale area. I believe in white varieties. They show very strong varietal characters. And that's what we try and do.

Now, we make those wines in different styles but styles to enhance those characters. So that Riesling, Semillon and Verdelho are unwooded. We do occasionally make a wooded Semillon. But they're generally unwooded. The Chardonnay gets new oak. Sauvignon Blanc gets one year oak because it doesn't, I believe, have the same intensity of flavour. But there is real desire to show varietal characters and have good strong flavours in those wines.

With the red, the opposite. To make a style rather than a varietal. So that's why we have the blend and the oak to try and make a "claret" style, if I can use that terminology, because I think that's the sort of style that Margaret River grapes makes. Now, it's not a Bordeaux wine, it's a Margaret River wine. But of that style. With fruit flavours and wood and good fine tannins to try and give it that sort of character. So, yes, there's quite a conscious decision in terms of what styles of wine we're making.

Well, Tony, because we've got a few time limitations today—but let's look overall from the time you've been involved in the industry, from your early training through. What are some of the biggest changes you've seen? I mean, the south west is obviously—that's a huge -

TD: Well, the south west is a huge change, and that's had an enormous impact on the whole Western Australian industry, but I think also internationally. Because, you know, I suppose if you talk to the wine *cognoscente* anywhere in the world and you name a few Australian regions, you'd reckon that Margaret River, and maybe Mount Barker, would probably be mentioned, along with Coonawarra and places like that, as being premium regions. And the focus of the Western Australian industry is in that particular part of the market, I think's been a particular thing that I'm glad to see. We're now saying Western Australia should really concentrate on premium wine production. OK, so that's been important.

The investment in the industry. And the investment from outside the industry. Not only from within. The attraction to professional people and now, of course, the corporate dollar to some extent through the prospectus, that's been a hell of a change. I mean, it's just gone with the growth of the wine industry anyway. So that's been a big change.

Obviously knowing about growing vines in a new environment's had a big impact.

The appreciation, certainly from myself anyway, I hope others do the same, that having the spread of regions, you get a spread of wines. I think that's important to see a range of styles. And even though we've lost a lot of our fortified wines, we still thankfully make some good ones in Western Australia. There's still an interest in them, and I'm glad to see that. I'm glad to see that people are still hanging on and making those styles. I think it's important to keep that diversity.

I think the social change has been one of the big changes in terms of people's appreciation of wine. Becoming part of our culture. And that's Australia wide certainly, but in Western Australia it's been strong in the cafe society and all the wine/food thing.

It's quite parochial here, too, isn't it?

TD: It is. In my life, it's changed. It's changed from being totally anti Western Australian wine—not totally, but strongly anti Western Australian wine to very pro Western Australian wine. In fact, when I started here we imported 87% of the wine we consumed in Western Australia. And I really believe now that Western Australians have a great appreciation for their wine. I think that's because other people outside of the State have, and they've said, 'Gee, if they like it, we must have a look at these wines'. And that's what's happened.
So we have a degree of parochialism, and it's justified. *(Laughs)* Not only with wine, but with everything. We are a long way away from anywhere—and there's a fair bit of Western Australia's history in that attitude, but I think it's also -

That's true.

TD: To our credit. Anybody who visits here has come a long way, so therefore there must be a story about that. Why they've come this far to see us, or whatever they do here. So I think we've been interested in that. I think Western Australians have a good interest in wines from other places as well. So we're not that parochial that we won't try other things, and I think that's always been a strength. And again, some of the other things I've been involved in include lecturing and wine tastings and work with groups of wine people—in all, a very expansive interest in wines. And I think that's been good for our industry here. And I think that's also had a lot to do with the development of the quality and style of Western Australian wines. That our people have had that breadth of interest.
What other changes? Oh, gee. Probably lots of others I can think of. Government involvement I think's become much greater and broader. Quite an interesting history with this department getting involved in the 1890's with providing technical support to the industry, which is quite unusual in Australia at the time, and even until recently in some areas. I won't go into other States, but certainly some States didn't pick it up until quite recently. And again, other government agencies, commerce and trade and tourism, again, with the

development in the industry have been very strong supporters of the industry. And I think that's been important as well.

I think one of the big changes we're going to see from now on—I think it's starting. Well, not starting now. It's been going on, but I think we're now going to see probably a quantum leap. Is in terms of the industry's ability to administer itself, and to develop its relationship with government. To become more politically astute. Because the industry has attracted a lot more attention to itself, and therefore there are a lot more demands on it. Not just for its product but for its services and whatever else it can provide, and its opinion. So that's going to be an area that we're going to see a lot more change in.

R & D. Certainly that's become much more important nationally, and I think it's happened here too. The Australian industry is investing a lot more in R & D, and it's keen to get the information and be more innovative. It's had to become more innovative. And that will have to continue because of our importance of getting our product out to the world market. We have to become more innovative. So there's a lot of things.

Well, Tony, the tape's blinking at me. So thank you very much.

TD: That's a pleasure.