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OH 692/41

Full transcript of an interview with

BRIAN CROSER

on 29 May 2003

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

OH 692/41 **BRIAN CROSER**

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OH 692/41 TAPE 1 - SIDE A

AUSTRALIAN WINE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.
Interview with Brian Croser on 29th May, 2003.
Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Brian, where and when were you born?

BC: I was born in Millicent in March 1948.

Tell me a bit about your parents, Brian. What did they do?

BC: My father comes from a long line of farming people. Arrived in South Australia in 1848 at Rapid Bay. My mother comes from a long line of farming people—*Laughs*—but she had a Scottish father who was a more recent immigrant. The Barkers(?) of the South East were her family. Both have got a long history of being in South Australia. Both came the same way—from Victoria. Landed in Victoria and came over here.

So you come from pretty solid farming stock, in other words.

BC: Yes. Presbyterian and Methodist.

Oh! There's a mixture for you.

BC: Yes.

Don't tell me. Scotch College—it's got to be.

BC: Yes, exactly. *(Laughter)*

Was it?

BC: Yes.

There you go!

BC: Head Prefect of a long time ago.

So you were educated in the South East and then at Scotch, Brian?

BC: No. I was born in the South East—that's the question you asked me.

Yes.

BC: My mother didn't get on with my father-in-law. My father was the youngest of nine kids. So they left Millicent and bought a farm in Clare. So I really grew up in Clare from age six to age fifteen/sixteen. I was a boarder at Scotch.

Mainly secondary school, was it?

BC: Yes. Only for secondary school, and then my parents moved to town when I was fifteen. I had two brothers who had to go to school and they simply couldn't afford to send them to boarding school, so they moved to town.

So when you grew up, Brian, were you exposed to wine in the home? Or was that something that wasn't around at all?

BC: A little bit in Clare. Just over the hill from our farm were the beginning of the vineyards. We were in the Hill River Valley and right on the edge of what's called the Rogers property, which is the biggest property that BRL Hardy bought for the Leasingham brand in the north of Clare. So I grew up with kids who were blockers sons. They were the poor people in those days. These days it's the other way around. The graziers are the poor people and the blockers are the wealthy ones. *(Laughs)*

Yes, I know a few of the graziers and they are, too. *(Laughs)*

BC: They are. The property I grew up on is covered in grapes now.

Oh, okay. So it's in that beautiful patch out that Hill River side.

BC: Yes.

So Brian, you go to Scotch. How did you come to be involved with the wine industry?

BC: Through a long line of accidents, but I guess a basic thing was that education was a very strong thing in my family, at least in my mother's family—you know, a family of teachers—and I always felt that being a farmer you needed to know something about the science of farming. So I grew up with the concept that I'd go to university and do something in the bio technical area in agriculture.

So where did that place you?

BC: Well, the Headmaster of Scotch College was then Charles Fisher, the Red(?) Archbishop's son. He came from Rhodesia, where he was the head of a school, to teach here. And he came primarily for one reason, and that was because he loved Australian red wine. He taught me biology in my later years in school. And chemistry. And we fermented wine together. He was not afraid to give his top students a glass of good red to look at, as a scientific curiosity. *(Laughter)*

And this is at a time when red probably wasn't appreciated in the Australian community.

BC: This was before the red move. So this is early 60s. I think I left school in '65.

So where did that take you—that interest?

BC: Into ag science. And a lot of my friends from Scotch came with me. I sort of had a clique of friends without being too—anyway, I was a boarder who was in the top of the top class, which was not tolerated at a boarding school. *(Laughter)* I had a lot of friends who followed along and felt academically inclined and brave enough to try it. They went into ag science with me. And they all did cattle, sheep and grass, and I decided that I'd do horticulture and biochemistry in preparation for a career in wine, when it was not a popular thing. Roseworthy was the only real alternative.

In Australia?

BC: Yes.

(Tape restarted)

So Brian, you were at Adelaide Uni, in other words?

BC: Yes. Started at Flinders because all medical, dentistry and ag science students were sent to Flinders for their first year in the early years of Flinders. I was at Flinders in second year that Flinders was founded, so that would be '67 I think.

Yes, that's correct. That's quite correct. That's when it was still a campus of the University of Adelaide, wasn't it?

BC: Yes.

So you did that, and did your interest in wine continue at that early point?

BC: Sure. We had lots of flagons of Pirramimma red, and Port, and the rest. By then I'd met Bryce Rankine and Brian Coombe and they'd been very sympathetic to my very immature bleatings about wanting to be a winemaker, and actually pointed me in the right direction.

So how did you get tangled up work-wise with Hardys eventually? You went through your learning experience.

BC: Yes.

Was Hardys your first appointment?

BC: Yes. I knew part way through ag science that the ag science course wasn't going to equip me to be a winemaker because it wasn't designed to do that. Horticulture was fine, microbiology was fine, biochemistry was fine. So I decided that I had to go and do a Masters somewhere, and I couldn't afford to do that without support. So I looked around for a company to support me. I went to Chateau Leonay and I worked with John Vickery for a year, sort of in the holidays, and Brian Coombe suggested that I go and see Tom Hardy, which I did. Tom and I sat down and talked.

He happened to have a need to technically upgrade the company. He said, 'Yes, I'll support you'. So that's how that happened.

So Brian Coombe, just to backtrack, was a lecturer at the time, wasn't he?

BC: Yes. Brian Coombe was a viticultural specialist, but he was a horticulture teacher. He'd been to Davis and he'd done his PhD in Davis, so he knew all about Davis. And that's how I headed for Davis.

That was my next question. So that's how you came to know about Davis.

BC: Yes, very much.

So Brian would've been there at the time with Professor Olmo and those guys?

BC: Yes. So was I. I mean, they were still going. Olmo, Singleton, Amerine, Berg—they were the mainstay.

So you were the only twilight -

BC: Yes.

So Hardys in a sense apprenticed you to go to Davis, did they?

BC: Yes. After I'd been with them for two and a half years as their Quality Control Officer at Mile End, and I'd reorganised all their bottling and quality control and laboratory analysis operations, I then headed off to Davis for a year and a half.

So when you were at Mile End, Brian, was Dick Heath still there then?

BC: Dick Heath was the chief winemaker and he retired after I came back. Bob Hagley was still at McLaren Vale. So I had the benefit of working with those people. Jack Kilgour had been brought in as consultant winemaker by Tom Hardy because he was so worried about the quality, and Jack was probably my greatest mentor in those days.

Now that's interesting because a number of other winemakers, just a tad younger than you but not very much younger, speak about him in the same way.

BC: So that would be Bill Hardy and Tim James and Geoff Weaver, all of whom I employed, except for Bill. Geoff and Tim James ended up at Hardys because I employed them.

Yes. Well, they speak about Kilgour in the same way too, as the person who really was *(couldn't decipher word/s).*

BC: Yes, he was. He was a grumpy, old man. He was a grumpy, old Scotsman who had been jilted in life by circumstance, but he had an enquiring scientific mind and he wouldn't accept second-rate answers. I believed he was far superior to Max Schubert, and I think technically he was. He said that the only reason that Max Schubert ever made any good wine was—what was the name of the guy who ran the laboratory?

Ray Beckwith.

BC: Ray Beckwith was Max Schubert's strength.

You're looking at Ray Beckwith's greatest fan here. You won't get an argument from me. Or Chris Hancock. *(Laughs)* As you probably know.

BC: Yes.

So Brian, there you were being stretched a little by the likes of Kilgour and the others there.

BC: Yes.

You obviously saw Davis as an opportunity. How did you find it when you got there with those people?

BC: As a school, it was a school of remedial winemaking, which disappointed me. I thought that it would be far more entrepreneurial in a scientific sense, and it wasn't. It was all about what you did when you got it wrong, and that actually led me to think about another way of teaching wine, which is what I did when I went to Wagga. But as an industry, it was

just absolutely mind boggling for somebody like me because Mondavi had just started *(couldn't decipher word)* and the petite(?) wine era had just started. And Chardonnay was just beginning its long and sustained run of doubling quantity every four years, both in that country and in this country—later.

So how long were you at Davis? Just over two years?

BC: No, I was there for fifteen months, and then three months on the journey home.

And the journey home took you where?

BC: Europe, Germany, France, Spain. All the usual suspects.

And was that a learning experience as well?

BC: Yes, it was. It wasn't as much a learning experience as it should've been. I got much more out of going back later in the late 70s with the Len Evans Wine Company—back to France. I was anxious to get home at that time because there was a lot of pressure in Hardys. They had quality control problems. They hadn't won any gold medals in shows for a long time. Dick Heath was about to retire. Wayne Jackson was the Company Secretary. He used to send me the cheques to sustain me, other than the fact that Anne went with me and she had a job as a biochemist with a geneticist there.

I just felt the pressure to get back. And in fact that pressure got to me to the point where I put my thesis on hydrogen sulphide under my arm, having been told by Cunkee—I'd spelt every sulphide in the thesis s.u.l.p.h.i.d.e, and the American spelling was s.u.l.f.i.d.e, and there were probably 10,000 references to sulphide in the thesis—'You have to change it'. That was before the days of word processors and Anne had patiently typed the whole thing. It's still in the bottom drawer at home.

Ralph Cunkee, great friend of mine. He always cries about the fact that I never ever sent it back. *(Laughs)*

So when you came back, what were you charged with at Hardys?

BC: I said what I wanted to do. I just wanted to go to a winery and make some wine because I'd been Quality Control Officer, then I'd been at Davis. So I went to Waikerie. This is where my memory gets bad.
Before I went, I made wine at Waikerie in '72 at the Cyrilton winery, and I'd made a Riesling, which was the best Riesling in the company, in an old cement tank out of Riverland fruit, whereas all the good Riesling coming out of Eden Valley and Barossa and McLaren Vale was being mucked up by the winemakers who were then a fairly incompetent bunch—through the system. So when I came back I was given responsibility for making the first white wines out of the Keppoch vineyard. They were Rieslings in 1974, which were quite successful, and some Sauvignon Blanc out of McLaren Vale. I did that through the Siegersdorf system, but working out of Mile End. And I also worked down at Tintara, making wine down there. So I was sort of itinerant.

So was Hagley out of it by then?

BC: No, no. Hagley was still in.

So he let you in, did he?

BC: He did.

(Tape restarted)

So Brian, in a sense you were a roving winemaker for the company between the different facilities.

BC: Yes. And then in '75, I made the wine at Siegersdorf. I was stationed at Siegersdorf. Bill Hardy was at McLaren Vale in '74, so I made wine in conjunction with him in '74 in McLaren Vale.

That's right.

BC: In '75 I was stationed at Siegersdorf. So I made all the white wine that year.

And that was the Riesling, in particular, that made Hardys at that time—pretty much.

BC: It did. Interesting that Rosemount was made at the same time. It had been a terrible failure. It had a muck up in its technical systems up until '75. In '75, John Ellis made a Traminer and a Riesling that were the beginning of the success in Rosemount.

Is that the start of a new generation of Riesling?

BC: Yes, it was. No question. I mean, the precedent had been the '69 Pewsey Vale and probably the Orlando—what did they call it?

Barossa Riesling.

BC: Barossa Riesling had been there.

'52.

BC: And Buring wines were there, but this was Riesling of a different style. Much riper style with a touch of residual sweetness.

Had John Vickery influenced you towards that Riesling at all?

BC: I worked with John, and John Ellis in fact. I camped with John Ellis in a caravan at Leonay. By the way, that's where I first met Tim James, who lived on site because his stepfather -

Reg Shipster.

BC: Yes. So Reg was an influence on me. Vickery was. He wasn't all that kind to me because I was a university boy and he was for Roseworthy. He and I are great friends. I respect him and I think he respects me. But his fastidiousness with—what was his name? He'd still be around. Anyhow, I'll think about his assistant's name. They were incredibly fastidious and they had all those wonderful ageing Rieslings, but they were made out of green fruit, basically. Very low sugar, Eden Valley, high acid, and they tasted like acid and water when they were first made, and then they took time in bottle to come around. And I certainly looked at that and thought that, well, riper fruit would be better. So that was the beginning of something.

So in that time at Hardys in '75, were you still thinking that you'd be staying there, or had you thoughts of moving on even then?

BC: No, I thought I'd be staying there. I'm sure in the vintage of 1975, having fixed all the microbiology and the quality control and, you know, carrying yeast cultures up the Main North Road—I can remember I had a Torana, one of the worst Toranas in the world. A six cylinder motor in a *(couldn't decipher word/s)* basically. I had a trailer of 1,000 litres of yeast on behind. I took off at some crossing at Gepps Cross, and I looked back and the whole bumper bar and the yeast culture's all sitting in the middle of the crossing, and I'm already half a kilometre up the road. *(Laughs)* Anyway, I did all that stuff. Made my own cultures and fermented all the wine up at Siegersdorf, and I thought the next step would be to make all the wine up at McLaren Vale, and finally become chief winemaker.
By the end of that year Dick had retired, and I had to assume the responsibility for the whole of the winemaking, as chief winemaker, which is planning and monitoring. At that point I went to Tom Hardy and said, 'Look, this is not for me. I really need more hands-on viticulture, and more hands-on winemaking'.
By the way, there were a lot of people involved by then in what we were doing. Bill and other younger people. We'd gone into a whole fruit monitoring programme, which I designed, so we did sampling of every vineyard. Things that weren't done by anybody in those days.

Where had you been alerted to all that fruit monitoring style of work? Was that in the States, or was it just something that you -

BC: Some of it but, no, it was pretty much saying to myself, using agricultural knowledge, how do we know this is ripe enough? So statistically we've got to monitor the vineyard. You know, because there's a green corner, a ripe corner, a droughted corner and there's a vigorous corner. So I worked out a programme of doing all that, which is still used industry-wide basically.

Am I right in saying, Brian, that at that time in the industry, apart from maybe a number of winemakers that you could count on your hand, very few even touched a vineyard, or went near it?

BC: Absolutely. They just ordered the grapes and saw them as they came across the weighbridge. And that was Dick Heath and Bob Hagley—the whole works.

So what took you beyond Hardys at this point?

BC: That thing about not wanting to be desk bound, and needing more experience. So I went to see Tom Hardy. Obviously I felt very indebted to Hardys and indentured to them. He said, 'Oh, look, I understand that'. I said, 'I don't want to work for a competitor. I've just got to find a way of being more hands-on. There's a job on offer at Roseworthy and I thought I might go up there and teach'. He said, 'Don't do that. There's a whole new situation emerging in central New South Wales. Ron Potter's setting up Charles Sturt and they're looking for a lecturer. I'm sure you'd be better if you go up and put your own stamp on something new and not go to Roseworthy'. So I did. That's how I ended up there.

What did you find there?

BC: Nothing much. Tony Jordan. And Don Lester. They were both there. He was a physical chemist.

Tony was.

BC: And Don was a plant physiologist. Both with a fringe interest in wine, who had been given the responsibility of pulling the student body together, waiting on the wine science course to be written.

Had you met Ron Potter prior to this?

BC: Yes. Only in passing, in an equipment sense. And he's actually told me since that when he said to somebody that they were going to appoint Croser at Riverina College, whoever he spoke to (and he's never told who) said, 'Don't be mad. He's too erratic'. *(Laughter)*

It's a fairly interesting step for me to contemplate somebody like Ron Potter, who had a background in winemaking and practical engineering, actually doing what he did—to be so involved with that educational side of the industry.

BC: Oh, Ron Potter's much more than a winemaker and engineer. Ron Potter's an essential philosopher. He's written to me heaps of stuff about the state of the universities and the moral bankruptcy of the Government in expecting universities not to have public good aspects, but to diminish their funding and rely more on the commerciality of all those things. He's one of the great philosophers. In fact, he's a great Australian.

He is.

BC: Extraordinarily intelligent person. Very deep thinking. Very liberal. Very open-minded. Very well read.

I was hoping you'd actually answer like that. Thank you. Setting up the course at Wagga would've been a fair sort of challenge given that there was no course at all -

BC: Sure was. There was a student body who were already clamouring for notes and relevant lectures in wine science and viticulture and wine microbiology and wine chemistry. I'd never written anything on those things other than answer exams. So I had to set about writing a thing from scratch, as well as teaching it. And in my naivety I thought that, well, we've got to get some practical into this so we'll start a winery as well, which we did in the old olive oil pressing factory on the Wagga campus, which is still the centre of the campus. I enlisted the student body to help me build it, and got freebies from Potter and from ACI and anybody else I could lean on to do it, and we built a winery.

So this is '76/77 we're talking about?

BC: Yes. The first vintage was in '77.

That's correct. I knew that. But '76 you'd also -

BC: Also started Petaluma. And fermented a wine over at San Bernadino winery. Part of my deal with Riverina was that I could consult, so I had two or three consultancies, one of which was San Bernadino. And Ron donated me a Maralinga rocket fuel tank to ferment my own Riesling in, which came from Michelton.

San Bernadino was where? Griffith?

BC: Yes. Stan Aliprandi.

At that time though, that winery was growing like mad, wasn't it?

BC: Yes. They were very successful with some fruit flavoured products and things. And they were trying to make the transition across to being more conventional. He and his brother-in-law and sister-in-law—I think his wife's sister—were helping him, and they were just frantic. They didn't know whether they were making profit or not, they were just pushing wine out the door. The wine tasted terrible. The fruit flavoured products were doing okay. They had all sorts of quality control problems. Out of all of that I helped them a bit, and fermented my own wine there.

So that was a Spatlese Riesling?

BC: It was only a Spatlese because it refused to ferment as far as it should've fermented. It was meant to be a dry wine but it didn't quite get there. And the Bank Manager was saying to me, 'When are you going sell it'. So I thought that, well, I'll bottle it as a Spatlese, which is what happened.

Now at that stage, you were actually showing at wine shows, and that was particularly successful, wasn't it?

BC: Yes, it was. So was the Siegersdorf before it. And all other components of the Siegersdorf.
Ross Shelmerdine, who was the founder of Michelton, sold me the Riesling grapes. I had a long, long involvement with Michelton after that.

I always remember going down to Michelton to see my grapes being machine harvested and taken straight into the winery, and I was sort of organising the processing. Ross was up on the harvester with me and he was very pleased that somebody with an emerging profile was dealing with Michelton grapes. And Malcolm Fraser rang him in the middle of the night on the machine harvester. He had this conversation with Malcolm Fraser and said that Brian Croser's here, so I spoke to Malcolm.

At a time when he was at the peak of his -

BC: Yes.

I don't know whether popularity is the word, but certainly power.

BC: Yes.

So Brian, the next year when you built the winery with the students at Wagga, you also make an award winning wine at Petaluma. Is that correct? Gewürztraminer in '77?

BC: Yes, that was an award winning wine. And for the College. Both. That was my second daughter's birth year, so I've still got a stack of that.

There was that, and from my notes there was a Chardonnay as well.

BC: There was. It was one of the first Chardonnays made in the country, other than Tyrrells and Alf Kurtz at Mudgee and Gehrigs at -

Oh, Bernie? Rutherglen.

BC: Yes. And that's the Cowra vineyards. That was Ian Grey, and that was John *(couldn't decipher name)*, who became my great friend. He ended up in Margaret River running the Leeuwin vineyard—he's now retired—because I recommended him as a consultant to Denis Horgan.

Wheels within wheels.

BC: A lot. A lot.

Was that the nature of the industry at the time?

BC: Probably not. It was pretty much the nature of where I sat in things I think, in being in Wagga and being in the educational hub and having lots and lots of contacts who were looking for new styles of winemaking and new winemakers and new viticulturists.

So the contact with Denis Horgan, was that because you'd had experience with Mondavi in California, or was it just -

BC: No, it was because Denis was wondering what to do. He invited me over to help. I consulted to him for quite some time. I remember sitting with him and Brian Hamilton, who was manager of Barrack Mines—a thing that went bust in a big way—around a camp fire outside his little asbestos cottage, talking about how you set up a premium wine business, giving him my view of it, even before I'd done that. *(Laughter)*

Did he know that?

BC: Oh, I think he believed me.

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

Brian, we've been talking that you set up the course at Wagga, and I know from talking to so many of your former students that it was an inspirational course. It must've been for you, too, I think. *(Laughs)*

BC: It was. You wouldn't call it disciplined. *(Laughs)* We did things that the Occupational Health and Safety and risk management people would be absolutely horrified by. We drove all day and all night to get to loads of grapes, and to Montrose winery to process grapes, and down to Brown Brothers to process grapes, and down to Michelton to process grapes. I remember being horrified that David *(couldn't decipher word)*, and somebody with him—I think Evan Ward—were in a car and they were

falling asleep on their way back from Mudgee. They took the wrong turn and they ended up on a road that was supposed to be an overpass that hadn't been completed, and they actually vaulted across the main road in a University car, which ended up suitably wrecked but they were fine, which was a miracle. In those days Cliff Blake and all these minions were happy to say, you know, get on and do it. You know, just let's get there. They were highly competitive with Roseworthy at that time. They needed to establish themselves.

So it was really urging people on.

BC: Of course then you've got to recycle when I asked Cliff to come back.

To Adelaide?

BC: To fill in after he retired, so there's a nice bit of cyclic history there.

Well, that's not bad at all, is it? I like that.
So Brian, you're at Wagga for what? Two and a half/three years?

BC: Two and a half I think. I got there in December of '75, and I left there in August of '78.

How did you conceive that idea of Petaluma, and where did it go to after the Wagga years?

BC: Petaluma was a consulting company to begin with. When I decided to leave Hardys and go to Wagga I sat down with my great friend, Rob Forbes, who's an accountant and lawyer, and we drank a lot of Californian wine one night and said that I needed a company because I was going to consult and be hands-on in the industry as well. So what name do we call it? And we pulled out the Californian Atlas and pinned the tail on the donkey.

So there was a link, Brian, yes. Well done. On the verge of the Sonoma and Napa.

BC: Yes. There's a great big monument to the Temperance movement right in the middle of the town. It's a water trough. *(Laughs)*

Yes, that's right.
The place that the people of Petaluma love showing you most is the saloon behind the coffee shop front.

BC: Yes, exactly.

So Brian, you set that up as a consulting company, and you make some wine over those first two years, '76/77.

BC: Yes. But it moved one step after that. I decided, at a later stage after naming the company and founding the company, that I wanted to make wine as well. I'd already decided that way back but I'd never connected the name Petaluma and the consulting company to the making of wine.

Oh, okay.

BC: I could've been a partner with anybody to make wine *(sounds like, in naming a)* new company anywhere and it would've been Petaluma, my own consulting company, that would've been the partner. What did become different is that I did it on my own, through the consulting company, and then automatically the name of the consulting company went on the label. I nearly went with—and I'm glad I didn't—Tisdall, who wanted me to design his winery and build his winery and go with him. So it would've been Petaluma consulting to the Tisdall label, which I would've been a part owner of. That was more likely to be the scenario, but it didn't turn out the way because I made the choice not to.

So if I'm sort of reading what you did right, you had a philosophy that was no compromise in quality, number one.

BC: Yes.

You were selecting small parcels of quality fruit from anywhere you could grab it.

BC: These days we think of them all as being the noble varieties but in those days the only noble varieties were Shiraz, Cabernet and Riesling. Semillon maybe. And things like Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer,

Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, were all called exotic varieties because they'd never been seen *en masse* in this country. So Riesling was a natural—was an extension of the Siegersdorf experience, and the credibility that gave me.

Cowra provided, and John *(couldn't decipher name)* provided, the opportunity for access to Chardonnay, which was an extension of the Californian experience. And the Gewürztraminer happened to be there too, as was Sauvignon Blanc, which I made for the College.

So you'd become aware I guess by this time, too, that there were the likes of people in the industry already like Peter Wall who'd been experimenting with the so called exotics?

BC: Oh, yes. All the companies were. Even Hardys had. My parents live up on Mount Bonython here, and before I went to Davis in 1972 I set up a mixed propagation, which was all the rage for the exotic varieties. I built it, and this propagation thing was built out of steel and asbestos I think—sheet asbestos—for growing Chardonnay cuttings, and I planted out half an acre of Chardonnay cuttings up here in 1972 in conjunction with Jim Hardy, who was in charge of viticulture at Hardys, to try and get some plant material.

This isn't roundabout I hope, but what led you to buy the property here in 1978?

BC: It goes back to Brian Coombe and my thesis in my final year at the University, which was on acid retention in grapes. It was all about cool climate, and all about malic acid and how you needed a cool climate to keep the acid. And it's all about the wine quality effects that had. And then going to California after having written that thesis. And I identified spots in Australia where you could achieve this acid effect, including the Adelaide Hills and the high points in Victoria, and Pipers Brook, and *(couldn't decipher word)* and so on. And then having gone to California and seen the Chardonnay that was an early ripening variety, it became—and I was also interested in sparkling wine, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir,

very cold area champagne—a natural to think about acid, Chardonnay, cool climate, sparkling wine, Chardonnay table wine like the table wine produced by Freemark, Abbey, Mayacamas (the companies I'd come to admire in California).

So a lot of input, but it all pointed in one direction. If you were a South Australian and your parents live on the back of Mount Bonython, and your Dad's the land agent in the area and you look around for the best possible slope, he's likely to be able to get it for you. So a lot of serendipity. There is a threat of science and logic and reason when(?) this property was bought, because it's got a north slope, it's got a very good geology in the soil, which I understood at the time, and it was not used for anything else. Even though the person who had it didn't want to sell it, I finally persuaded him through my father's intrusion(?).

Is it around the same time that you buy this that you meet up with Len Evans and Peter Fox as well?

BC: I met Len in '74 at McLaren Vale. I was making wine down there with Bill. I was in charge of Bill. And Len came over for the McLaren Vale Bushing Festival. I can always remember him coming through the top gate of that big sloping drive down into McLaren cellars. I happened to be in that top area—the ironstone building with all the old red gum vats in it—and I could hear this whistling and this yodelling. I looked out and there's this short Welshman coming down. He said, 'I've come down to meet you'. So we met.

And then in '78, before I left Wagga to come here—I'd already bought this property. I knew where I was coming. Len had been my agent for Petaluma in Sydney since 1976. So he'd become a very close personal friend from '75 onwards. I'd been to Bulletin Place many, many times because Wagga to Sydney is not all that far, and if there was some Latours and Lafites and some *(couldn't decipher word)* on, then I would be down there in a flash on a Friday afternoon if I could get away. And also I was a taster for the Wine Buyers Guide. What was it? *(Couldn't decipher word),* and all those guys. And Halliday. *(Sounds like, Wirra Wirra)* team. If you

go back and look at those old buyers guides—it was the Wine Buyers Guide—you can see all the funny things that were sort of almost naive descriptions of the wines. You know, the beginning of the fruit *(sounds like, and wine descriptions all come out).* I was regarded as being the precocious scientist for that group.

Was John Beeston on that?

BC: Yes. He tasted sometimes. There was Beeston, Albert(?), Halliday, Evans. They were the mainstays. Fox was there sometimes because he was Len Evans' financier. So there's a whole history there that in '78 when I decided to come back here, Len said, 'Well, look, I've been talking to Tim Knappstein and I've bought this vineyard in Clare and this vineyard in Coonawarra and I want to process the fruit. Why don't you build a winery for us—Fox, Evans, you, and you become a partner in it—and we'll call it all Petaluma and you can take over those two vineyards and build it'. I said, 'I will do that if we can build the winery at Piccadilly, not in Clare. I can live there, plant my vineyard, grow my Chardonnay, process it through the same winery'. He said, 'Fine. That's done'. And that's what we did. And in the beginning they were not part of the Chardonnay or the sparkling wine project, but it obviously became evident that the Petaluma brand and the winery would all fit into this site.

So Brian, you'd seen Piccadilly as pretty much purely Chardonnay and sparkling, had you?

BC: Purely Chardonnay and sparkling wine. That's all. We've only ever planted Pinot Noir and Chardonnay *(sounds like, for that purpose)* from 1978 onwards.

Now what Evans and Fox bought was that Clare vineyard, and was it Sharefarmers they bought as well?

BC: No. What we call the Evans vineyard.

Yes, the Evans vineyard. So Sharefarmers was later. That's where I got a bit confused.

BC: I planted that in '83.

We won't go into that one too far.

BC: It's the best vineyard in Coonawarra. It's in Coonawarra now, too. *(Laughs)*

Yes, so it's the Evans vineyard at Coonawarra. That's right.

BC: Twenty acres.

Right in the heart of the old part.

BC: No, it's not. Right on the northern end.

Yes, of course it is.

BC: And it was planted on *(couldn't decipher word/s)* Stirling, who was a rough old bulldozer driver. What was his name? I'll think of it later. Anyway, it was a jungle because it had been over fertilised, over watered. It was planted in '68/69. I made it go cold turkey. Later on I bulldozed half of it—a quarter of it and grafted a quarter of it, which was the Shiraz. And Merlot. And doing wonderful work ever since.

So Clare would've been producing—what?—Riesling for you?

BC: Yes. And I had definitely an intention to go to Clare. I was hoping to buy something near where I grew up to grow Riesling, and this was just over the hill.

Dry grown Riesling?

BC: Yes. Run by a fabulous guy called Bernie Hanlin, an apiarist. Bernie became my great friend and mentor in things geological, bush. How you can be a water diviner by being an amateur geologist was really what it was about.

Bernie's one of the great local characters of the mid north.

BC: Yes. He and Judy, his wife. And when he died in '86, that was a huge loss to me. That's why we called the vineyard Hanlin Hill.

Brian, then it's that Clare patch, and eventually Coonawarra was Cab Sav pretty much?

BC: Well, it was half Cab Sav/half Shiraz when we got there, and then eventually it became Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Half/half.

Now the partnership with the Evans/Fox partners, was that a pretty scintillating era for those -

BC: Oh, sure. They went to California, and I went to California with them, and we bought a property on the Silverado Trail together, which is now the Round Hill winery. Lovely property. And I designed a winery for it. It was back in the Aragonian *(sounds like, mosque)*. The design of which is still a good design. And we made wine bought out of the Robert Young vineyard at Souverain(?), which was a contract facility. Bill Bonetti was the winemaker there. It became Sonoma Cutrer. There's a stack of stuff. I loved it. It was like going home after being there at Davis, and all my friends around and so on. I only went over for the vintage period of '79 and '80, and then Fox was killed in '81.

That's right. I know Len said to me that that was really the critical point for him—with Peter's death—that things sort of turned on their head.
How did Petaluma cope at that time?

BC: Because he also had Raoul(?) and P..... In fact I made wine in Raoul(?) in '79, and in '80 we did the Souverain(?) thing.

So where's Raoul(?)?

BC: That's in Graves in Bordeaux. So I was there with Len and all his entourage. I was the winemaker and in the cellar, which had wet floors and bad electricity, on my own. Anyway, that's another story.
What was the question that you just asked?

With Peter Fox's death, what -

BC: Well, Len became very depressed, very angry. He tried to gets lots and lots of people to help buy out the whole thing because his vision was disappearing before his eyes. He never ever blamed Fox, but he blamed the other people for not stepping in.

By then I was very firm friends with Denis Horgan because I'd been helping him with the Leeuwin concept. And Anne and I looked at one another and said, 'Well, we were supposed to have 20% of the company that's gone broke, but we never actually had 20% because it was never recognised on paper. We do have this piece of property with a winery on it. Down the bottom we've got an emerging vineyard. We've got kids. What are we going to do?'

We'd actually run the business here as a contract business. All employees were mine, and all the debts and creditors were mine, and the profit was passed on to the parent organisation, so it was still a contract business anyway when we were running it. So we were doing the books for the(?) employees and so on. Anne was collecting all the debts. She never ever had a bad debt. She'd carry the kids in with poohey nappies and sit there until they paid up.

Anyway, we said, 'Oh, well, let's go to the Bank and see what we can do'. We went to Greg Frisby who was the manager of the National Bank here. He said, 'Yes, we'll support you. What do you want to do?' And I said, 'We want to keep running the business Petaluma. We want to keep selling the wine. We want to fund the ongoing operations'. The Bank stood behind us. 'And when the time comes we'll buy it out if we can'. They could see that the assets didn't belong to us, other than the wine inventory, and the debts and the creditors and so on. So they had no risk. As they saw it, they had minimal risk. They had my property, and they had the inventory to cover the debt. And how we bought the property out, the winery and all the rest of it, would be a problem for later, which they didn't have to resolve.

So we went on like that for a while. It was very tough. And the undertakers for the business called me into Sydney and he sat me down in

this underground restaurant, and said to me. 'Now you're going to hand me the business at Petaluma. All the assets, the brand, the inventory. Because if you don't we're going to cut you off at the knees'. John Grant—this was a Receiver person.

And I said, 'I'm not going to do that'. I'd already taken advice from Halliday. I said, 'I'm going to actually keep on running the business and I'm going to buy the winery and the bottom block because you don't have access without me. You don't have water. You can't get in'. Halliday advised me as a friend—he was with Clayton Utz at the time—'This is what you do'.

And Halliday and I devised this thing for Len. Halliday had a migraine at all times because Len was shouting at him, he was angry, he was angry with me, he was depressed. And Halliday and I said that he's going to lose the rest and we can't help that. He's going to lose maybe everything except Rothbury (because that was in a seperate shareholding), but what we'll do is we'll save Petaluma and Halliday and I would keep and allocate to him a shareholding equivalent to mine. Whoever we bring in will have to recognise that shareholding. So we did.

I got Denis to come in, and he said, 'Yes, I'll try and buy the lot'. Len hated Denis because he'd dealt with him as an accountant in some sort of accountants' conference somewhere and he thought he was an arrogant upstart. Now they're great mates of course. And he didn't want to have a bar of it. He said, 'I want to buy the whole thing back'. And I thought *(sounds like, better backers)* and so on.

Denis did the negotiation—he was a tough dealer in those—with the undertakers and failed to buy at his price the overseas assets. And I don't think he really had his heart in that. It was too big of a management problem. He was heavily into mining and so on. But he did get Petaluma out(?) for a while.

A substantial sum of money.

BC: $600,000.

Wow!

BC: Well, in those days that was a lot. And he said, 'Okay, I'll live up to the agreement. I don't like Len Evans. I would rather do it just you and me, 50/50'. I said, 'Sorry. Even though Len doesn't want to be part of this. He's a reluctant shareholder'. He said, 'Okay. $10,000 in each'. So we each put in $10,000—$30,000—and we borrowed $570,000 against a Barrack Mining guarantee. It may've been a bit more than that. I should bloody remember. I don't dwell on the past.

No, that's alright.

BC: We bought it out, and Denis was one-third partner until '85 when Bollinger came in, and he became a quarter partner. I started Oregon in '85 and Denis got really angry that I was splitting my time, and I bought him out because he didn't want me to do Oregon.

Just tell me about the Oregon experience please, Brian.

BC: I wanted always to go back to the west coast of America and do something after Davis and then the Evans Wine Company thing. I went back to Davis in 1980 to the centenary of the Davis agricultural college, and they had a big function and I met this Texan, a recent graduate, who wanted to come and work for me. He'd been working in Switzerland—Roland Soles. So he came over here and worked for two years. Then he went back to America to work in Tecoma Washington. He hated that so he came back here for another year. I offered him the job as chief winemaker and he said, 'No. What I want to do is to go back and set up a business in Oregon'. I said, 'Well, why don't we go back together and you be a consultant and I'll support you. We'll do the consultancy together and then we'll build a winery'. That's how it happened.

So how long did you keep that going for, Brian?

BC: We started in '85 and sold it into Petaluma in 2001. So a highly successful company, and Roland's still running it for Lion Nathan.

The story of Petaluma from when Denis came in, and then you eventually got bought out and you continued on, has really been a growth story, Brian?

BC: Oh, sure. Absolutely. But not volume growth so much as value and profit growth. It's been a slow growth story because it's all related to specific vineyards. So you can only grow if you plant more vines in those vineyards. That's been the Petaluma story. So extension of Hanlin Hill has meant extension of the Riesling. Extension of the vineyards in the Piccadilly Valley where we've got seven different sites, which are owned by different people but managed by us, a site chosen by me basically, to get more wine you have to plant a vineyard ten years before.
The same with the Evans and Sharefarmers vineyard for the Coonawarra. Now the Mount Barker project with Shiraz and Viognier out there.

Now just tell me about the Mount Barker one. That's quite recent, isn't it?

BC: Yes. I wanted to grow Shiraz somewhere but I didn't want to grow it in McLaren Vale, Barossa or Clare, from the point of view that that's traditional Australian Shiraz. I wanted to go somewhere where there was more of a Rhone influence, and early in my travels around the hills it occurred to me that Clarendon, Kyneton(?) and Mount Barker are all on the edge on what I would call a ring of Shiraz suitability, in climatic terms. Mount Barker happens to be a mountain in the *(couldn't decipher words),* which is very similar to *(couldn't decipher words)*, so I decided that I would plant a vineyard out there.
At that point, Mike Simons was working for me, late 80s/early 90s, and he said, 'Well, Mum and Dad want to buy a block out there and they want to grow grapes'. I said, 'Why don't they buy a block on Mount Barker and we'll plant Shiraz and Viognier, which is what we did. So the first vineyard was owned by them and planted by them, and now Petaluma's got a vineyard on the same soil and geology just over the freeway from that.

So that's how that began, and grew.

BC: Yes.

You've kept on with this direction of choosing suitable pieces of land to plant the varieties you want to pursue,

BC: Absolutely. From a pure *(couldn't decipher word)* viewpoint, and it has been from day one. Apart from the fact that in Cowra you had Chardonnay, Gewürtraminer, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, all growing alongside one another, but that's the only place you could buy the exotic varieties in those days.

And Brian, the purchase of the Old Mill at Bridgewater—the old flour mill—was that primarily to actually have a sparkling wine cellar?

BC: Yes. Len was very reluctant about Piccadilly Valley and the Chardonnay and the sparkling wine project. He wasn't sure that he wanted to be part of Petaluma. But finally he saw the quality of the fruit and what I was saying was correct. We had to look for somewhere to mature the wine, and we knew that we couldn't do it here. We needed somewhere seperate for technical reasons, and we needed underground cellars. We thought about buying the block up the top from the Boy Scouts, but they wouldn't sell it. And one day a fellow called Doc—the mining company that processed tailings out of mines in Central Australia, and he was a well known vagabond from St Peter's College. Doc somebody. Doc Martin? No. *(Laughs)*

Anyway, he owned the Bridgewater Mill and he was in financial strife, and he came to me and he said, 'Look, your lawyer's a friend of mine and says that you might be interested in this old building for storage'. I knew it because one of my uncles was the last miller there and I'd visited very many times.

I went over, and I thought that that's it. So I took Evans over and he said, 'That's it'. So we bought it for $175,000. We spent 2.1million on it. The best investment ever made. Fantastic building.

I suppose for Petaluma it's also given them a focus on the main drags, if you like, through the Hills you wouldn't have had otherwise.

BC: Yes. And this is not a place I've ever designed. There's no place here to receive people. It's not a place where people should come.

So was the hospitality concept there, too, an extension of what you wanted to do with Petaluma, or did it just come out of the building?

BC: No. Very much an extension of what we were going to do. A food/wine thing is a very important part of the ethos that we had developed in the Evans Wine Company. Was the concept behind Petaluma. But Len's a bit more extravagant in those things than I am. *(Laughs)*

OH 692/41 TAPE 2 - SIDE A

AUSTRALIAN WINE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.
Interview with Brian Croser on 29th May, 2003.
Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Brian, just say that's an overview of Petaluma that we've been through, and I hope it's sufficient even though it's just an overview.
Just want to ask you some broader questions now, particularly about the changes you've perceived in the industry since you first came into it. I want you to think for a minute what would be the greatest changes, particularly technologically, that you witnessed.

BC: I think it all goes together, structurally and technologically. I mean, it's gone from being a fortified wine industry to a table wine industry, from a domestic table wine industry to being a global table wine industry. The biggest change technologically would be—it was an industry that made wine by accident. Allowed the vintage to proceed and at the end of the vintage sorted out what was best from what was worst. These days it's an industry that makes wine by design. Has designed vineyards for specific purposes and they are treated in a specific way in the winery to come out with the wine that was designed before the vintage. Very much more quality controlled, very much more focused on viticulture as well.

So in a sense that's the big picture of those changes.

BC: Yes.

Along the way have there been some critical events that have actually changed the way you've perceived making of wine, or have you stuck firm to where you -

BC: It's been an evolution. It wasn't hard to create a revolution in terms of technology because the technology was appalling. You know, the Jack Kilgours and the Ray Beckwiths were few and far between. So just to go back to basics and say that you've got to start with something clean,

you've got to start with something of quality out of the vineyard that you know about, and you've got to be microbiologically and in a processing sense you've got to be disciplined, you've got to be pure and clean, then at the end you've got a product that represents what the vineyard meant to produce, or what it did produce. That wasn't a concept that was understood. And I introduced all of the quality control techniques, and the yeast culture and bacteria culture, and things that weren't done, to make sure that all that happened properly.

After that—mid 70s—all the rest became, and has been, a constant business of refinement. You actually learn how much you can let the reins loose and still observe the process and understand what's happening, but not interfere and let it go until you're in the danger zone that it might go over the top and distort what you're getting from the vineyard. So that's been really an evolutionary thing. But if you go back to the basic techniques, they're all pretty much the same throughout the industry, as I'll be egotistical enough to say I basically introduced in the mid 70s because of a whole swag of techniques that are now regarded as just the basis of technology in this country that weren't there in the mid 70s.

Certainly, even with my knowledge I know the yeast culture is very much that offshoot from what you'd started then. Even if you left it on the Main North Road. ***(Laughter)***

BC: Just another simple issue. The way that you cleaned the wineries like the way you cleaned a dairy. They used the same products. They used chlorines and bromines, and they used these very strong aromatic things. I cut all that out at Wagga, and at Hardys before that, and said that you only use two simple things. You use a basic alkaline, which is sodium hydroxide or sodium bicarbonate, and then you use citric acid to rinse with. No smell, no odour, both natural compounds, and you get a better result than you get with these other things that contaminate wine. And now everybody in the industry does that. Nobody uses any chlorines or bromines or anything. In those days people argued that you were going to

get awful infections and things. Food chemistry at Davis taught me a lot of that. I have to say that that was good stuff from food chemistry.

And Brian, in the last three decades that you've been involved in the industry, you've also been very involved in the politics of the industry, and I don't really think we've got time to go into a lot of that today. But has there always been, despite the differences perhaps, a willingness by Australian winemakers and wineries to pursue a single vision, or was that something that took a lot of fighting for?

BC: It took a lot of fighting for, and I think it's somewhat lost now, too. I don't want to be an Aunt Sally on that but I'll go through three phases. When I came into the industry, Lindemans and Penfolds dominated it, and they only ran industry agendas for their own purposes. And Ray Kidd, followed by Williams and Mackley, wanted a *laissez-faire* industry where dog ate dog. You know, they didn't want to support central research. They didn't want to support the Wine and Brandy Corporation. For them, it was their money going to support lame dogs. So that's what I came into. And then with Trott's inspiration, Jordan's early intervention, and then left for me to completely organise and run, the Winemakers' Forum for small winemakers. Chris Winnell, who was my lawyer, drew up the Constitution for that for me, which is a one vote/one membership, instead of having a number of tonnage/a number of votes, which is the Australian Wine and Brandy Producers' Association.

Then the opportunity was becoming very obvious for the Australian wine industry in premium wine. John Pendrigh and I got together. He was the head of the co-ops because he was Berri Renmano. I was Winemakers' Forum. We forced the Wine and Brandy Producers' Association basically into accepting that it was a three way division of power with Government and we would all go together. And we finally amalgamated into the three colleges of the Federation. And from '89 onwards, with the flow of the tide in favour of commerce in the wine industry in Australia, the Federation's done a fantastic job. Everybody sees(?) the highlights from there—getting the first CRC. Wine Australia, getting that up and going. I mean, there are

lots of highlights. The two tax fights, which I think we've come out of very well regardless of what the ongoing background is. The industry's had a very stable tax environment for a long time.

I'm afraid that, for the last four years, that again the self interest in the big companies has taken over, but Australian wine is now commodity fare around the world. That has been an active suppression of regional differentiation in the markets of the world, *(sounds like, as being)* antipathetic to the cross regional south east of Australia with no vintage variation where Australia produces the best commercial wine. So I see another era coming where, again, there's going to be a split, and then there'll be another amalgamation and they'll go on with it.

And do you still have those extremely positive views about the future of the Australian industry that you've had for some time?

BC: Always had a positive view. Still do. If you go back to the basics—the soil, the climate, where we are in the world and the technology—we can produce the world's best wine. We've got a way to go before we get there but we've got the ingredients. At the moment we don't have the incentives financially to do it, like the Californians have. And we don't have the environment to do it because the world expects us to be commodity suppliers. But that will change. And we need another change. We need another energy to emerge behind a guild of quality winemakers, which includes the big guys with all their quality products too, but quite a different agenda to the commercial wine agenda of Australia. So that Coonawarra is as credible as the Napa for Cabernet as Bordeaux for *(couldn't decipher word)*. Because it's not in the world at this moment. So that the Adelaide Hills is as credible for Chardonnay as Burgundy or Russian River.

So we're talking about the future of the industry, Brian, and how you see a guild of really super premium winemakers, if that's the way of putting it.

BC: Winemakers of super premium wines, because they may also be the producers of commodity wine or bulk wine or whatever. I don't care, as long as they put their eggs in the basket of promoting regional differentiation and Australia's superiority in terms of varietal match to region for its top wines.

So if that's the way ahead, and it certainly seems that that could well be the way ahead, where would that lead Australia? Instead of just being a commercial producer, you'd be recognised as great regions of the world and the great wines of the world.

BC: And at the moment we're not, however much we kid ourselves. We are in this country. Our consumers know that Coonawarra's great, and Semillon from the Hunter's great, and Riesling from Clare is great, but the world doesn't, and they look to other regions and other producers. And in a way we're not really driven enough to get closer to perfection in those styles. As much as people like to think we're making some of the great wines in the world, we're not. Our best Cabernets aren't as good as the best Cabernets from California or Bordeaux. I firmly believe we've got a way to catch up.

So Brian, if that's where you see the industry going, where does Brian Croser go within that?

BC: That's a bit of a crossroads and a nexus at the moment. *(Laughs)* I never thought that I'd end up working for anybody, and I am working as a consultant for Lion Nathan. And I'm doing that for the very specific reasons that you don't separate from a lifetime of work in the vineyards—whoever owns them, they're still mine. So I'm working with my team of people who've been with me, I suppose, for twenty years. And we are in the process of really refining—we hope—those regions and styles, and I hope to be part of that for a very long time.

But Lion Nathan's got another agenda, which is a good agenda. You might guess where it came from. They want to become a global fine wine producer and distributor. They certainly have an ambition to own quality wineries, and will own quality wineries in California, France, Italy and

Spain—wherever—and we'll have the distribution mechanisms to ensure that they get on the wine lists of the top restaurants in New York, San Francisco, London, Paris—wherever—and with that will carry the Australasian impetus, I hope, for our Australasian portfolio. But I would hope that all that would be matched and supported by the endeavour of other companies in a cooperative guild.

Well, thanks very much for talking today, Brian. It's been a very quick journey I know. Sorry about that. So thank you.