



Ross Lawson

On January 27, the Marlborough wine industry lost one of its iconic pioneers. Ross Lawson died, after a 15 month battle with cancer. He will be remembered for his strong political views and his love of the industry. In memory of Ross and the impact he had, we are re-running a From The Cellar article, first printed in November 2006.

“Bloody Mad!”

That was the reaction from Ross Lawson’s peers when he said he was going to plant grapes on his small block in Alabama Rd.

“You have to be absolutely mad to plant grapes there,” Ross was told. “It’s swamp land, prone to flooding. Grapes will never grow there!”

Never mind the fact that Ross and wife Barbara had lived there for a number of years and were quite used to the land and what it could deliver.

Reinforcing the view that he was mad, was the fact he and Barbara decided to plant Gewurztraminer, a variety unknown in Marlborough. It wasn’t even a name the general public could pronounce. The wine was always referred to as the G wine or Tram-something-or-other.

Ross ended up having the last laugh when his Gewurztraminers became renowned for their quality – picking up a range of trophies over a period of 28 years.

Born in Kaikoura, Ross Lawson came from a solid farming background. He left school at the age of 16 and went off mustering, in the far reaches of Marlborough. After two years on the back blocks, he headed off to Australia like many others of his generation, to make his

fortune. Maybe that isn't quite the right phrase to describe Ross, as the word fortune was never a part of his vocabulary.

"I was a bit of a political animal for whatever reasons when I headed off to Australia to shear."

He spent the next six years on the other side of the Tasman, concerned at how unfair the working environment was for shearers and getting to understand the political machinations of the industry.

"Working in Aussie I got to see the need for a union to look after the workers. As I said I was a bit of a political animal."

While he may have worked in Aussie for six years, he found the time to come home occasionally to catch up with family. It was on one of those visits home that he met Barbara, who was a nurse at Wairau Hospital.

"I bet you met after an accident," I put to him.

With a grin, he agreed, although the story of their initial meeting was censored. At least it was told to me off the record. Needless to say, it wasn't a happy first meeting –although it developed into a life long partnership.

When he finally came back to New Zealand in 1971, he came back to Barbara and his initial career as a shearer. The political side of things took off and he became a representative of the New Zealand Workers Union, responsible for the 70 shearers working here in Marlborough.

Then he and Barbara set up a pool building business and established a small lifestyle block on Alabama Rd. Sheep were the order of the day, not surprisingly, given Ross's background as a shearer. At the time, Montana was busy buying up land and planting out the region's first grapes.

"I didn't think about it too much, apart from the fact that these crazy guys were paying out \$700 an acre on properties that weren't worth half that. There was no farm land around here that was worth that much."

He continued to build pools, making quite a name for himself. But by 1982, it had got to the stage that he couldn't really afford not to look at the potential of the wine industry.

"Penfolds were advertising for growers at the time. And if you were in a reasonably high tax bracket, you couldn't afford not to grow grapes. Apart from land, the only thing that was deemed as capital in the development, was the plants. Everything else was tax deductible. It was amazing. So if you were in that 60 cents in the dollar tax bracket, it was a huge thing.

"But that wasn't the only reason I got into it. The industry was beginning to attract a bit of attention and I was interested. It seemed like the right time to do it.

“Then Penfolds promptly went broke of course and then the oversupply thing happened, just as the Penfolds’ growers were getting to their cropping stage. So looking back it probably wasn’t a great start.”

It was Tony Hoksburgen and Steve Carter who Ross turned to for advice on what to grow on his small 10acre block. While most in the region were growing Muller Thurgau, and later Sauvignon Blanc, Ross and Barbara were advised to grow Gewürztraminer. The two consultants believed that the Alabama Rd area was “heaven sent” for the variety.

“Everybody said we were mad. They talked about seeing this area as a lake. It was all bullshit really, you know what memory is like. It’s pretty selective.”

The Lawsons planted out 10 acres with plants supplied by Penfolds, which if Ross’s memory was correct, cost 35cents a plant. Those plants have gone on to form a life of their own, as they were on their own rootstock and eventually, like most others in the region, developed phylloxera. When it came time for Ross to replant, they propagated their own bud wood.

“No one knew where the original cuttings came from. So we replanted our own bud wood, and these days many people who are planting Gewurztraminer cuttings are calling it the Lawson clone.”

Initially the Lawsons were growing for Penfolds, then for Montana, after the buyout. But by 1990, Ross became more interested in the industry and his love of wine had begun to develop. He began to seriously think about establishing his own label.

“We were supplying some of the premium producers, and it got me more interested in the quality aspects of viticulture. I began to take on some consultancy work.”

It was at this stage he began thinking about other varieties, and started buying land around the region to develop his portfolio, in line with developing his own label. His wine was being made at Vintech at the time, although as the demand for his own label grew, he and Barbara began thinking about building their own winery. By 1994, they had come to a decision, that it was time to go solo. If he ever needed a sign that he was doing the right thing – the night he was due to harvest the ’94 vintage, provided it.

“We were buying fruit from Henk (Ruesink) and the night we harvested, it started to rain, and it was bucketing down. We had our slot out at Vintech that night. We had the harvester ready to go, and I rang John Belsham (at Vintech) and said, we are going to have to cancel out tonight. He said, ‘well you won’t get back in for five days.’ I said we couldn’t pick in the rain. He told me he had no choice, the only spot available was that one we had booked that night. If we had left if for five days it all would have rotted on the vines. We waited and buggered round, in the end we picked. We had no choice. And I said then and there, this is the last

time we will be processing somewhere else. You spend the whole year looking after great fruit and we couldn't afford to leave it or, to wait for five days."

Ross was never content to sit back on his winegrowing laurels. He immersed himself in the industry to the point of taking steps to improve the end product, on behalf of winegrowers nationally, and consumers internationally. His involvement in the screwcap initiative is something he was, understandably very proud of.

In 2006 he admitted they went into the entire process of removing corks and replacing with screwcaps, slightly naively.

"What did we think we were doing? We were taking such a hell of a big risk, but I don't think that we realised that at the time."

Was he surprised at the momentum the initiative gained?

"Hell yeah. It's pretty hard to believe. When you look back at 2001, that first year, two percent of the wines produced in New Zealand were capped. Those first two or three years we used to get charged a premium for bottles. Now people using cork are being charged a premium. The figure these days for capped wines is around the 90 percent.

"People said it wouldn't work in the market place. Villa Maria was the big one, they went in boots and all. Montana stood back and Cloudy Bay waited too. But now they are 100 percent behind it."

Anybody who knew Ross Lawson, wasn't surprised that he took on such a project. He loved nothing more than a challenge. The screwcap initiative was just one of many that he undertook in his 66 years – it may well have been his greatest.

But when you look back at his move from the political arenas of union representative, to grape grower, you see a similar trend. He was prepared to take on those who thought they knew better.

From shearer to owner of a renowned Marlborough wine label, Ross Lawson never lost his common touch. His political leanings never dimmed, despite his years. And his love of the wine industry was paramount to his and Barbara's huge success.

Bloody mad, his friends called him. Maybe he was – but Ross Lawson was also one of those pioneers that helped forge Marlborough's winemaking reputation, from the ground up.