



A case of 2018 Grange, the highest-rated Grange ever per wine app CellarTracker.

The Soul of a Wine: Grange

1986 Penfolds Grange Hermitage

AS NOTED in my Quintessential Barrington column in November/December 2021, I am occasionally going to feature articles on my other favorite wines due to readers' requests. Although my fascination with Châteauneuf-du-Pape (and specifically with Beaucastel) dates from the 1969 vintage, my love affair with Penfolds® Grange dates from the 1981 vintage.

The history of Grange is interesting. It dates from the 1951 vintage and begins in 1949 when Penfolds Chief Winemaker Max Schubert moved to France to better understand how Australian wines could be improved in quality. At that time, most Australian table wines compared poorly to the best of France and the focus was mainly on fortified wines. In short, Max appreciated the quality of the French wines, (especially Bordeaux) but began to focus on what he could do with the more widely planted Shiraz (Syrah) grape in Australia. Upon his return, he produced his first Grange, then known as Grange Hermitage, in 1951. It was not immediately successful and much of it was sold by my dear friend Len Evans for \$1 per bottle, and Max allegedly gave away many bottles as presents or sold same at deep discounts.

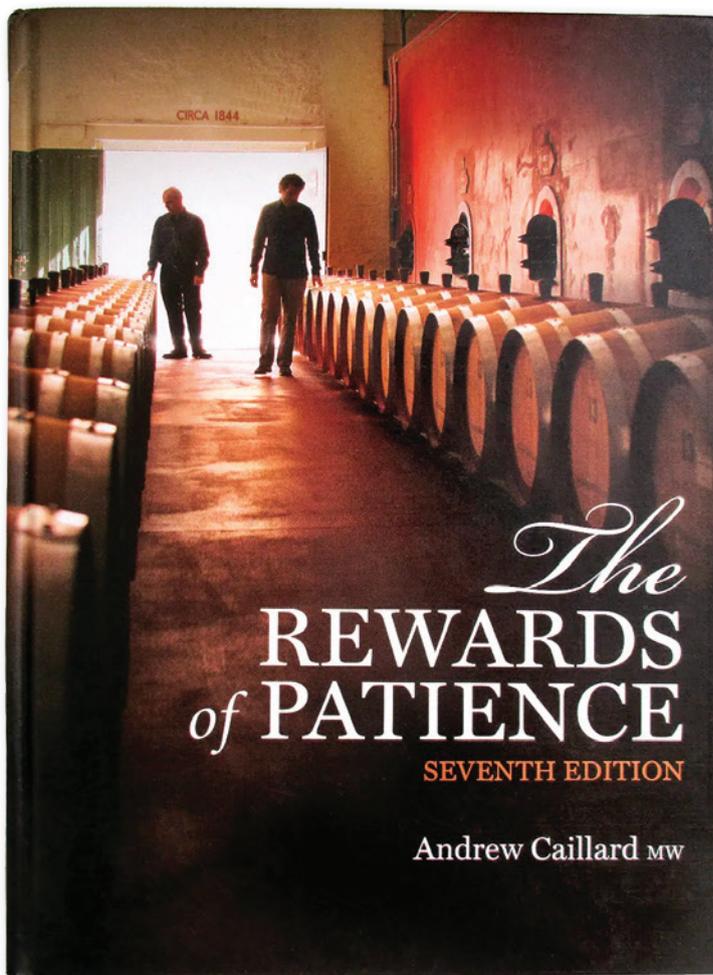
As a result of a very poor showing of the 1951–1956 vintages in 1957 by the leading Australian wine critics, the Penfolds Board of Directors, and friends of the same, Max was forbidden to make the wine starting with the 1957 vintage. The next three vintages ('57, '58, and '59) known as the “hidden” vintages were done ‘on the sly’ with minimal resources. The Board authorized production again in 1960 based on the result of increasingly favorable wine tastings of the earliest Grange Hermitages. When the Board of Directors inquired as to whether he could make the wine, he showed them the “hidden” vintages and the rest is history.



Max Schubert (1915–1994, Australia) was Penfolds Chief Winemaker during the mid-20th century.

In 2023, a single bottle of the 1951 Grange Hermitage sold for \$A 122,000 or \$US 81,333. Not a bad return for a wine once described by a noted wine critic as, “A very good dry port which no one in their right mind will buy—let alone drink.” Another described the wine as, “A concoction of wild fruits and sundry berries with crushed ants predominating.”

Through the next six-plus decades, the production of Grange Hermitage has been entrusted to only four winemakers—Max Schubert (1951-1973), Don Ditter (1973-1986), John Duval (1986-2002), and Peter Gago (2002-present). Although I never met Max or Don Ditter, their accomplishments loom large over the wine world to this day. I know John Duval and think he is one of the greatest winemakers ever. Len Evans and I have always thought his 1986 Grange to be the finest we ever had. Although Len has been gone since 2006, I have yet to have a superior vintage even though my good friend Peter Gago has made many highly rated vintages, but they are not yet mature enough for my palate. To appreciate Grange Hermitage, one needs to read Penfolds’ “The Rewards of Patience”—one of the greatest wine books that is published anew every seven



“The Rewards of Patience” by Andrew Caillard, MW is the definitive reference guide to Penfolds’ wines. It provides wine collectors with independent and updated expert opinion about the aging progression of Penfolds vintages.



Leonard Paul (Len) Evans (1930–2006, Australia) was known as the godfather of the Australian wine industry.

years with updated notes on almost all of Penfolds’ wines. For those with fine cellars, the title says it all regarding drinking fine wines from any producer, kept perfectly—to experience them optimally demands time and great provenance.

Having experienced much Grange Hermitage over the past 40 years with not an insignificant number of bottles with my mentor Len Evans, Australia’s greatest wine ambassador ever, I believe Grange to be one of the greatest, if not the greatest, wines in the world. It is also the only such wine in the world to not come from a regularly defined plot or plots of grapes. It is mostly Shiraz grapes, but at least 86% Shiraz with the remainder being Cabernet Sauvignon.

Finally, this wine is undoubtedly the richest wine in the world. Unfortunately, because it is expensive at \$500-600 upon release, it is not widely consumed, but for those who can afford it, almost all say it is their favorite wine ever.

On that note, Max Schubert died on March 6, 1994, and our friends Lynn and Chuck Cavallo had dinner and spent the night at our house. We served the 1981 Grange and Chuck talked about

the wine all evening as the best he had ever had (and that’s saying something as a 1982 First Growth Bordeaux fan). Imagine my thoughts as I walked them to their car in the morning, and picked up my Sunday paper, only to read that Max Schubert had died on the date of our dinner. À Votre Santé! 



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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