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DAVID LEHMANN IS ONE OF THE BAROSSA'S NEW BREED OF WINEMAKERS INTENT ON PUSHING TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES

ALL IN GOOD TIME

He has done his best to avoid a career making wine but now David Lehmann can't imagine doing anything else

Written by
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You would think "Lehmann" would be a handy surname for someone kicking off a career as a winemaker in South Australia.

But while David Lehmann, son of industry legend Peter, is undeniably proud of his heritage, the family name doesn't grace his wines.

Instead, he's stepped out of the shadows of his famous father and chosen the name David Franz (Franz is his middle name inherited from his pastor grandfather).

The 37-year-old has taken a round-about path to winemaking but now that he's arrived, he is determined to make his own way in the industry.

He does everything himself from growing the grapes through to the hand-printing of his bottles.

Invariably, David has been described as a laconic, laidback Aussie but he's also a talented, intuitive winemaker.

His David Franz wines, predominantly Cabernet and Shiraz, have garnered accolades from wine magazines *Decanter* (UK) and *Wine Spectator* (US) and respected critics such as James Halliday, Huon Hooke, Nick Stock and Philip White.

Behind the larrikin image is also a family man who loves life in Tanunda with his wife Nicki, three children - Georgina, 10, Benjamin, 8, and Alex, 3 - and dogs, Frank and Stella.

"I love the Barossa, it's my home, my identity is so tied up with this place. I also love the feeling of the space and the whole small community thing," he says.

"There's no place in the world I'd rather be than at home,

I've got everything I need here." These days it's hard to imagine why David and his younger brother Philip (now working at Peter Lehmann Wines) originally rallied against the idea of working in the wine game.

"We swore there was no way we'd go into the wine industry at all...it was a bit like the old bungee cord trying to get away from it!" he says.

The brothers came to Adelaide and David studied graphic design at Underdale while Phil pursued electrical engineering.

"It was a party year, my first year of freedom away from my parents, and I passed 80 per cent of the course, but also picked up a few other bad habits and ended up taking a year off in 1992."

David headed to the West Coast to work on a friend's farm for six months and then worked a vintage at St Hallett's winery doing the "hard yakka" night shift on the red fermenters. He later headed up to Queensland to work on a fruit and vegetable farm and spend time with his sister, Libby.

"We talked a lot about what I was going to do and we came to the conclusion I really should come back, finish the course and get mum and dad off my back, and then I could get on and do whatever I wanted to do in life."

David went back to university and made it about halfway through term one before meeting his future wife Nicki who was studying at the International College of Hospitality Management.

"I just saw her and fell in love with her, one week after

we'd met we got together, two weeks after that I told her I was going to marry her and she said 'yeah right' and then I did marry her, just to prove her wrong," David says.

"Nicki's studies took her on a six month industry placement on Brampton Island and I ended up throwing in my course in and following her up there, it was good fun."

Winemaking was still not on his radar so David turned his focus to a diploma in Hospitality Business Management before marrying Nicki in 1996. The couple headed off on an 11-month trip using around the world tickets received as a wedding present.

David worked at Glen Carlou Winery in Paarl, South Africa, while Nicki worked at Delheim Winery cellar door before a stint in the UK. Their plan was to travel further but Nicki fell pregnant and suffered badly with morning sickness so the trip was fast-tracked home.

"The time away left me so hungry for the Barossa I thought that I would burst my chest," David admits.

Back at home, he began to feel his winemaking destiny kick in.

"I finally realised there's no shame in it... being involved in the industry makes so much sense and I love it so much, so I thought 'bugger it - just do it,'" he says.

"We were brought up by mum (Margaret Lehmann) to be incredibly independent in terms of not ever relying on family to get things...we were brought up to take opportunities, if you get a leg up in life, take it and say thank you but don't expect it. "So for us it was really important to be

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Nicki and David Lehmann at home in the Barossa with one of their three children, Alex, and dog Stella

independently successful because dad's name does cast a long shadow."

When he told his dad he was going to be a winemaker, Peter's response was "no, you're not - you're going to be a vineyard hand first".

"It was great. I got to spend a lot of time in the vineyards at the grass roots level, absorbing the rhythms and learning the vines, and by 2002 I was running all the vineyards," he says.

David's first wines, made with brother Phil, were a 1998 Shiraz and Cabernet under the David Franz label.

"The '90s are absolutely awesome wines and set the production template, the basics of which are still unchanged today," he says. "I was still using Lehmann winery facilities to make my wine back then and I had such invaluable input from great people there so I had a lot of help...I'd never trained as a winemaker but asked pertinent questions and

then just mucked in and did it," he says. By 2000, he'd managed to convince his father to back him for a more serious vintage and he made 800 cases of Cabernet and 500 cases of Shiraz. Successive vintages turned out more excellent wines and, in 2004, David did his first full vintage at his own place - and has never looked back.

"My philosophy is relatively simple - I virtually don't manipulate the reds at all, it's pick and crush, then they spend a long time on skins. I love cooking and I approach winemaking like slow braising," he says.

"In so many ways there's a lot of c'est la vie in it as well, I don't force the winemaking, what I aim for is to let the natural flavours and natural balance come out in the wine.

"A lot of winemakers get caught up in aiming for perfection and while that's a lovely philosophy to go for, and I'm certainly not one to shoot low, quite often they lose the

passion of the wine by over-analysing every little nuance." David, one of the next generation of winemakers, sees the current mood in the Barossa as optimistic despite industry woes.

"So many young blokes like myself out there are having a crack, and by young I don't necessarily mean by age, as there are some older producers who may have been made redundant and starting up their own labels gone for the big vine change, the grape change," he says.

"It's a good scene, it's really positive to see great things happening in light of all the pressures on the industry from outside with over-supply... the world market is also not a walk in the park anymore.

"In times of adversity it's always been shown, during wars and so on, that it can be a time of great innovation when lots of bright new things come to the fore."

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For more on the Barossa Valley, see pages 15 - 28

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