



Orlando Wyndham
Pernod Ricard

Philip Laffer Chief Winemaker

When Philip Laffer was named Australia's Winemaker of the Year in 2002, the comments made by judging panel provided a succinct assessment of a man who has had an extraordinary influence both on Orlando Wyndham and the Australian wine industry.

"Phil Laffer is the quintessential large company winemaker: the kind of visionary who has made the Australian wine industry so successful on the export markets," said panel chairman Peter Forrestal.

"Under his direction, the Orlando ultra premiums have excelled, the Jacob's Creek Reserve range has over-delivered on value, and the huge volume Jacob's Creek wines have steadily improved and held their popularity in an increasingly crowded market place."

Philip's response was typically modest and self-effacing: "Awards like this, in a large company, are really given in recognition of a team effort," he said. "This award is an accolade for us all."

But Philip is very much the captain of the ship, overseeing a team of more than 20 winemakers.

His professional life runs at a frenetic pace, overseeing vintage from February to May, then hitting the road to nurture overseas markets – alternating a week away with a week at home, shuttling between the UK, America and Japan hosting dinners, attending trade shows, talking to distributors.

Philip makes sure, however, that he's at Rowland Flat in the Barossa Valley for the all-important vintage classification and blending tastings during June and July.

Despite his huge commitments in a company that spans South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, Philip remains a remarkably hands-on winemaker.

He says he has several roles within Orlando Wyndham: creating the right working environment for his winemaking team to achieve their best; as the guardian of style of Orlando's extensive portfolio; improving the company's viticulture and winemaking technology; and as Orlando's winemaking "face" – especially in international markets.

It's a far cry from the youthful days when he wanted to be a veterinary surgeon. He might have been, except his father, once a lecturer at Roseworthy Agricultural College, said he wasn't bright enough. That was a typically paternal underassessment, because Philip was smart enough to win a scholarship to Roseworthy, where he studied agricultural science while working vintages at local wineries.

His first wine industry job was in a winery near Rutherglen, where he says he “fell in with an extraordinary group of winemakers in the surrounding area, people like Mick Morris, fascinating characters who were all keen to impart their knowledge.

“Almost every day there was a formal tasting of up to 20 wines... it was great grounding in the wine industry.”

Orlando Wyndham persuaded Philip to join the company, initially as Operations Director, then Company Winemaker and now Chief Winemaker.

Philip has been the guiding hand behind the enormous commercial success of the Jacob's Creek range, including the introduction in 2000 of the upmarket Jacob's Creek Reserve and Limited Release ranges.

However, his greatest achievement has been the way he has orchestrated the steady improvement of the core Jacob's Creek range, the biggest selling Australian wine label in the world and the financial backbone of the Orlando Wyndham company.

As Orlando Wyndham's arbiter of style, he has to ensure consistent high quality across the range and setting the targets for his winemakers to meet.

“Understanding the importance of style is critical when you have such a large range of brands as Orlando,” he said.

“Each style must have its own image and reason to exist, whether it's Jacob's Creek, Poet's Corner, Centenary Hill or Jacaranda Ridge. But style is not a static thing. It has to develop as consumers' likes and dislikes change, which means you have to be able to read the market.”

None of this would be possible unless he was also a good team leader. Philip has a rare blend of focus, discipline and clear-sightedness combined with a down-to-earth wisdom, quiet modesty and consideration for others. He doesn't issue edicts from on high — he's out there with his winemakers and viticulturists daily, tasting, talking and earning considerable respect with such gestures as clearing away and washing up the glasses after a tasting.

A man of extraordinary energy, he sets a pace and a standard that could be the benchmark for any young winemaker beginning his or her career. While one day he may be in one of Orlando Wyndham's vineyards in NSW, Victoria or South Australia, he may well be in an international market the next talking about Australian wine and in particular the brands for which he has responsibility.

He extends this enthusiasm beyond the company, too. Name virtually any industry association or research body and Laffer either is or has been a highly active member of it. An articulate international ambassador both for Orlando Wyndham and the Australian wine industry, he believes this contribution is vital to maintaining Australia's position at the cutting edge of the global wine industry.

Still as keen and enthusiastic as he was at the start of his career, Philip has no desire to be seen as an elder statesman of the industry he loves. He just wishes he were at least five years younger, so fascinated is he by the rapid pace of development currently taking place.