

## Vale Dr. Bailey Carrodus: eccentric and enigmatic Australian winemaker

7 March 1930 to 19 September 2008



A pioneer winemaker who founded Yarra Yering in the cool-climate Yarra Valley of Victoria in Australia, Bailey Carrodus was something of an enigma and an acknowledged eccentric. He reminded guests of the late actor Alec Guinness dressed in a floppy hat and neatly pressed trousers but with a tidy, trimmed grey beard. Carrodus had an old-fashioned, circumspect courtesy and scholarly persona that was out of place in the informal, boisterous, modern Australian wine arena, as were his unique and charismatic wines.

Female wine writers, both Australian and British, tended to get on rather better with Carrodus than the males of that ilk who grumbled about the minuscule tasting glasses that the ever-practical Carrodus occasionally put out. Carrodus's eyes twinkled, but he could be gruff and elitist, and had the reputation of not suffering fools. At other times he was disarmingly friendly. He was a private man and little is known of his personal life. There was at least one long-term relationship, and the leaves on Yarra Yering's labels honour her name, Laurel, but he seems never to have married.

Carrodus cultivated an enigmatic air. Although he is listed as being born in Sydney, he enjoyed being described as a New Zealander because of the amount of time he spent there, followed by a decade working and wandering around Europe acquiring a taste for wines that had, as he put it, complexity and flavour. While there is little agreement about these points, few would dispute that he performed an important role in providing a degree of cosmopolitan savoir-faire at a vital time in the Australian wine revolution, something that he was able to back up with impeccable scientific qualifications.

As far as the information he made available is concerned, Bailey Balfour Carrodus was born in Sydney in 1930. He trained as a botanist at Victoria University College in New Zealand, studied viticulture at Roseworthy Agricultural College and completed his DPhil in plant physiology at The Queen's College, Oxford, in 1965. He specialised in nitrogen metabolism, on which he wrote several papers. He began his working life in New Zealand as a scientific adviser to the Ministry of Agriculture. From 1955 to 1958 he taught oenology at Roseworthy. His last teaching appointment was at Melbourne University from 1965 to 1969, although he continued as senior research fellow at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation until 1977.

On the side, he had been involved in making wine in the Clare and Hunter Valleys of South Australia and New South Wales respectively. From the late Sixties he had been heading out to the Yarra at the weekends looking for a warm spot in the cool valley. In 1969 he finally isolated the sloping site he was looking for in the Yarra Valley, northeast of Melbourne, an idyllic situation overlooking the Yarra River but, more importantly, a north-facing block of land high enough off the valley floor to avoid damaging late-spring frosts. The Yarra Valley had been first planted by settlers in the late 1830s, but in the 20th century interest in winemaking died out there as in many other parts of Australia. The first man to recognise the valley's potential was the lawyer Reg Evans, who produced experimental wines in 1969 and 1970. At the beginning, Evans and Carrodus were due to collaborate at Yarra Yering, but in the end Carrodus went off on his own, making the first commercial Yarra wine for 52 years in 1973, the same year that the nearby historic estate Yeringberg returned to wine production.

Typically, Carrodus had his own ideas about the sort of wines he wanted to make, no doubt stemming from his decade drinking European wines, and he felt strongly that Australian wines were wrong: "Lacking complexity of flavour, continuous flavour right through the palate, and aftertaste that stays in the mouth." Perhaps because he had trained as a botanist, he placed enormous importance on getting the best fruit. Wine could be no better than the fruit harvest from the vines: if the grapes were bad, no technical wizardry could save the wine. Australian winemakers know full well now that all great wines start in the vineyard but in the early days, when technology ruled, the French notion of terroir was an alien one.

Carrodus's ultra-methodical winery, as befits his scientific background, was designed entirely as a one-man operation with wines made only in small batches. All the wines were vinified in small, square, stainless steel-lined mobile fermentors that Carrodus could shift around the winery himself. Almost as innovative at that time was Carrodus's insistence on planting and tending unirrigated, low-yielding vines.

The wines were provided with numbers that referred to styles. He wanted to be able to alter the mix without having to rename the wines every year. No 1 was a Bordeaux blend, which had always contained merlot and malbec. No 2 was dominated by shiraz, but he eschewed the Australian classic of shiraz-cabernet and made additions of the white grapes marsanne and viognier after the model of the wines of Côte Rôtie in the Rhône Valley. As he put it, cabernet and shiraz "both need friends, but not one another".

No 3 was a mixture of Portuguese cultivars based on the touriga he had originally planted to make port. The white blends were led by Dry White No 1, which was a combination of semillon and sauvignon. There were also monovarietal bottlings of sangiovese and barbera and a highly prized chardonnay that drew occasional comparisons with Corton.

Carrodus was famously unsentimental when it came to winemaking. He was known for the phrase: "If it doesn't work, just tip it out." He had taken his own advice on several occasions. He planted mataro (mourvèdre) but ripped it up when he discovered that it would not ripen. Unlike other Australian winemakers, he had no time for American oak, telling visitors he was "utterly unconvinced" by it. For this reason perhaps, his wines often tasted more European than those of his neighbours. European visitors, used to the volatile acidity levels in great clarets, accepted the earthy, inky qualities of some of Carrodus's red wines that occasionally tasted positively farmyardy without fuss, but Australian commentators often dismissed them as faulty. Carrodus himself took the unprecedented step for an Australian winemaker of recalling his 1988 reds and refunding his customers in full.

Dry Red No 2 was one of the most successful reds in recent Australian history, but its future was placed in doubt when Carrodus learnt in the early Nineties that he could get \$50 a bottle for pinot noir. His response was to T-graft the shiraz vines over to pinot noir. A new plot called Underhill was bought for the shiraz but there was a little dip in quality at first.

Carrodus had begun with just ten pinot noir vines (from four separate clones), but it had always been good from Yarra Yering, with British commentators since the early 1980s frequently citing it as the estate's standalone winning wine, while the Australian critic James Halliday compared its quality to Romanée Conti, further enhancing its market appeal.

In later years Yarra Yering had expanded to 80 acres, and Carrodus had been assisted by Mark Haisma.

Carrodus had no heirs, and the future of the estate is at present unknown.

Bailey Carrodus, winemaker, was born on March 7, 1930. He died on September 19, 2008, aged 78

- *The Times*