

Penfolds man of science

Ray Beckwith OAM

IT was only after he retired that the scale of Ray Beckwith's contribution to making fine wines in Australia became known.

Ray's father, Arthur Henry Beckwith, owned a Cowell hardware and plumbing business for farmers "opening up Eyre Peninsula for settlement."

His mother Blanche was, before marriage, a music teacher at Wallaroo mines, Kadina. She had previously studied pianoforte at Adelaide University and was a fellow of Trinity College, London.

In 1919, the family moved to Murray Bridge, where Ray and his brothers Norman and Lance attended high school.

They would all become leading industrial chemists.

In 1929, Ray won an Education Department scholarship to attend Roseworthy Agricultural College. He was a keen cricketer, footballer and tennis player and also broke the junior and senior records in sheaf tossing.

Ray had topped the optional course of oenology at Roseworthy and in 1932 was offered a cadetship in chemistry at Roseworthy. It was while working under the patronage of distinguished academics John Williams and Alan Robb Hickinbotham that his interest in wine science blossomed. Ray worked briefly

with legendary winemakers Colin Hazelgrove and Roger Warren at Thomas Hardy and Sons at Mile End before being poached by Leslie Penfold Hyland in 1935.

In 1936, he married Coral Lodge, the sister-in-law of John Williams, one of his early mentors.

They moved to Nuriootpa in 1937 and set up home.

Son, Jim, was born in 1949.

Ray and Coral lived happily together for two months short of 60 years before that "wretched Alzheimer", as Ray called it, eventually claimed her life in 1996.

His work at Penfolds from 1935 to 1973 laid the foundations for modern winemaking.

In 1936, after visiting chemistry professor AK Macbeth at the University of Adelaide, he observed that "pH might be a useful tool in the control of bacterial growth in wine."

It was going to become the key in Ray's discovery of how to stabilise wine and protect it from spoilage. The implementation of pH meters and strict management standards revolutionised winemaking at Penfolds.

It underpinned the creative development of Grange Hermitage by Max Schubert and the growing range of Penfolds table wines, including St Henri Claret and Bin 389 Cabernet Shiraz. Ray's work led to a significant leap in wine quality and huge cost savings in production, giving Penfolds a



Milestones

Arthur Ray Beckwith OAM
Pioneering wine scientist

Born: February 23, 1912;

Cowell

Died: November 7, 2012;

Barossa Valley

Education: Murray Bridge High School, Roseworthy Agricultural College. Honours Diploma of Viticulture. Honorary doctorate University of Adelaide

Achievements: Advanced winemaking in Australia. Made the technical breakthroughs for Grange Hermitage

Family: Survived by son Jim and five grandchildren

significant competitive advantage during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. But a strict code of secrecy kept him well out of the limelight.

It would not be until 30 years after Ray's retirement that the Australian wine industry recognised his contribution to wine science with the Maurice O'Shea Award in 2006, the Medal of the Order of Australia in 2008 and his honorary doctorate.

Ray's autobiography, *Keep Good Wine Good and other matters*, was written in 2001 for his grandchildren.

It was a reflection of "my own curiosity for what my grandparents had achieved during their lifetime".

When he began work at Penfolds, the company was focused on port, the most popular drink of the era when bacterial spoilage affected so many dry reds. Penfolds had no vineyards and bought its grapes from the German Barossa Valley growers, who mostly delivered their grapes in horse-drawn wagons.

Many believe that Ray achieved

a world first with his use of pH to control bacteria in wine, putting Australia at the forefront of fine winemaking.

Long before the term quality control was in common use, he introduced "preventative" winemaking techniques at Penfolds to deal with the myriad complexities of protecting wines from loss of quality.