

Magnet

Cheese and wine paring makes for a special corporate event in Merimbula



By [Denise Dion](#)

Bega Group's top customers and suppliers were treated to something rather special as part of the company's annual corporate event when they were given a wine tasting at Wheelers which included a taste of Penfold's famous Grange wine.



David Williams, Barry Irvin and Peter Gago at Wheelers. Picture by Denise Dion

The Bega Group event brings together customers, suppliers and the people who support the organisation. The event benefits the local community in two ways, by hosting events for the visitors such as barefoot bowls, deep sea fishing, kayaking and by fundraising through a charity auction at a gala dinner held locally.

The money raised was about \$100,000 which will be donated to support the evacuation centre construction in Bega.



But for many, a highlight would have been the Penfold's wine tasting where around 80 people were guided through six Penfold's wines by Penfold's chief winemaker Peter Gago.



Organised by David Williams, food and agribusiness adviser and long-term friend and adviser to Bega Group chairman Barry Irvin, the wine tasting was part of the annual corporate event now in its 30th year.

An Aussie invention the goon bag is not just a budget-friendly drop that saves you cash but also does the planet a favour, cutting greenhouse gas emissions linked to fancy glass bottles in winemaking.

Mr Williams persuaded Mr Gago to run the wine tasting despite being in the middle of tasting the vintage. It meant Mr Gago flew into Merimbula and back to South Australia the same day.

What does it take to be a chief winemaker?

An excellent nose, a discerning palate and an absolute love of wine are vital but Mr Gago brought something else; an enthusiasm and easy charm which spilt across his audience as he guided them through a tasting in a completely non-ostentatious way.

"Which wine is best?" he asked after two chardonnays were poured for everyone.

"All you need to know is you have two glasses and the wine you prefer is the wine that's best," he said immediately removing any of the snobbery associated with wine tasting.

Mr Gago launched his career as a chemistry and mathematics teacher before succumbing to a long-held interest in wine.

After graduating as dux from a Bachelor of Applied Science (Oenology) at Roseworthy College, Mr Gago joined Penfold's the winemaking team in 1989, initially in the craftsmanship of sparkling wines, before moving on to reds as Penfold's red wine oenologist. In 2002 he became the fourth ever chief winemaker for Penfolds.

"We select purely on quality and style out of the bottle."

Blending is an art for Mr Gago who talked about the development of Penfold's 149, a blend of Californian cabinet and South Australian shiraz.

He was tasting a cabinet in California which wasn't as exciting as expected and suggested adding some of the shiraz he has brought with him.

In something akin to a benchtop science experiment they mixed the wines together and agreed it made all the difference. Penfold's 149 was born from the 14.9 per cent South Australian shiraz that was added.

Along with numerous industry accolades he also has two personal cellars.

"I've been collecting since I was 17 and have thousands (of bottles). Cellaring is one of the great joys," Mr Gago said. He recommends cellaring at between 13-15 degrees and not moving the wine around.

"Really old wine has a fragility which movement can affect. Old wine should be decanted at the dinner table, don't let it sit for several hours."

Mr Gago carries a plastic funnel for decanting and recommended transferring red wine from the bottle, leaving behind any sediment, to a simple decanter before rinsing the bottle out and returning the wine to its original bottle.

His office is a temple to the wine gods with the great and good coming to pay tribute.

He had entertained presidents, complete with sharp shooters on the roof and multiple helicopters, King Charles, at the time Prince Charles, and musicians such as Pink.



During question time Mr Gago was asked about corks versus screw caps.

He warned screw caps could get knocked and let air in to oxidise the wine.

"I can tell from a cork, the condition of the wine and the conditions it has been kept in," Mr Gago said.

In essence there's no difference but in the case of cork, which continues to be used for fine wines, at least you know before tasting.

And the Grange? Well it was a 2019 vintage and so a little young to be showing its true colours given those from the 80s and earlier still have a lot of life left in them.



