

*When Kim Seagram applied her Canadian family values to the Tasmanian wine and food sectors, growth was inevitable.*

## The Seagram touch

writer *Fiona Stocker*



*courtesy Kim Seagram*

If anyone could be described as a doyenne of the food, wine and hospitality scene, it's Kim Seagram. She has staffed the trade fair tables, schmoozed the journalists, sat on boards alongside captains of industry and wooed politicians with her soft Canadian vowels.

Drinks have been poured in the Seagram's name for generations, her great, great grandfather being the founder of the Canadian multinational which was once the largest owner of alcoholic beverage lines in the world.

For a brief time it looked as if Kim Seagram would make a break with family tradition. With a degree in biology from Queens University in

Ontario, she made a foray into molecular genetic research. "But my dear, have you ever been to a party with a bunch of biologists?" she asks.

Heading west to Calgary, she followed her ancestry into consumables and began working in a girlfriend's catering business. There she learnt flavour combinations and knife skills, prepping in the mornings, and working tables at corporate lunches, exclusive dinners and cocktail parties.

Drawn by bigger possibilities, she was soon working her way across the management streams of Canadian Pacific Hotels and Resorts, determined to be the first female general manager. While at the monumental Chateau Lake Louise – seven

restaurants and a ballroom – her career path encountered a disruptor in the form of Tasmanian businessman Rod Ascui, who was on a skiing holiday. Suddenly she found herself married and living “on the other side of the world”.

One of her first reactions: coming from a mature tourism destination, she found herself wondering why everybody else in the world didn't know about her new island home.

The two are well-matched in their passion for food and tendency to entrepreneurialism. Ascui owned and had planted the vineyard Lalla Gully and was selling half his pinot noir crop to Clover Hill Wines. He also owned a café, Ripples, at the historic Ritchie's Mill site in Launceston. Here Seagram made her influence felt straight away, taking the money he'd saved for a car and using it to buy Launceston's second espresso machine.

Ascui's vision for Ritchie's Mill was a restaurant and iconic food destination. This was a spark to tinder for Seagram, who was mystified that Tasmania had some of the world's best produce and yet none of the cachet of Italy, France or even Melbourne's dining scene. “We had to put Tasmania on a plate for the rest of the world,” she says.

They redeveloped the site and Stillwater, a new home of contemporary Tasmanian cuisine, was born. Opening in 2000, it won the national Renault Haute Cuisine award the following year.

Next came Black Cow Bistro, described by Seagram as a “great steak joint that you could wear a little black dress to”. This filled the niche for a restaurant featuring Tasmanian beef, with its grass fed, free range, growth-hormone-free credentials.

In both businesses, the couple established a tradition of partnering with others, bringing different skills into the mix and allowing for holiday breaks. This tradition morphed naturally into mentoring the next generation of Tasmanian

hospitality talent. Chef Craig Will is a co-owner, along with front-of-house manager Bianca Welsh and sommelier James Welsh.

You might think that creating two iconic restaurants was enough, but Seagram was on a mission to take Tasmania to the world. Taking her place at the boardroom tables of the burgeoning tourism and wine industries, she had popped the cork and was pouring.

Joining forefather of the Tasmanian wine industry Andrew Pirie in the Vineyards Association of Tasmania, she ran its marketing operations, off the side of her desk, for a decade.

One of the mainstays was taking a team to the annual Wine Australia showcases attended by trade and journalists. Seagram's approach to these was typically lateral. Wines were served from all four sides of a stand, and rather than each vineyard having a spot, chardonnays were on one table, aromatics, pinot noir and sparkling on each of the rest, and vineyard owners poured each other's wines and spruiked them too. It epitomised the growing understanding amongst producers that by working together they could get their wines the recognition they deserved.

Further setting themselves apart, the Tasmanians served food. Travelling with eskies on the plane, they brought game meats, oysters and more to match with their wines. Buyers and journalists stood five or six deep at the Tasmanian stand because of the quality, the rareness and the sense of something special on the table.

Back in Tasmania, the wine and food industry was reaching critical mass. Seagram began working with Tourism Tasmania, putting itineraries together for visiting journalists. Invited to join the board by then Minister for Tourism Paula Wriedt, for eight years she injected knowledge on food, wine and service, joining Brand Tasmania at about the same time with an identical remit.

The message that Kim Seagram sought to crystalize was the potential of wine, produce and tourism as economic drivers. It may seem clear as a flute of blanc de blanc to us now, with the eyes of the world on Tasmania's pastures, produce and wines that hold their own against counterparts from the old world, but not so long ago the point was lost on many a politician and business leader.

Lobbying on behalf of the Vineyards Association, Seagram was astounded to find the opinion of wine and tourism was that these sectors were sidelines at best. She put the figures on the table for them, most notably that while Tasmania represents less than half a per cent of the national crush, it garners 10 per cent of premium sales. She knew instinctively that the quality of offering in the food and visitation sector was easily a match and could yield the same results.

"Encouraging the wider business and political community to understand how important these brand building pillars are to our economy was one of the things that I really pushed," she says.

In a time when the forestry industry was failing, causing the dispersal of regional communities and a wave of migrations from the state, the collective value of small operators spread across the state seemed obvious, and was backed by the value of those same sectors across Europe and Canada.

Proof of the pudding came in a venture which epitomised the power of food and tourism initiatives to galvanise a community – Harvest Launceston, the farmers market that Seagram helped launch in 2011. Originally the vision of Jenny Edis, it was coaxed to life with seed funding and an overdraft on Edis' personal account, a board put together by Seagram and the go-to guidelines drafted by her friend, Churchill scholarship winner Jane Adams, of the Australian Farmers Market Association. Now a winner of multiple awards,

the market has become a tourism destination in its own right, has built social capital for farmers and producers, created new businesses and grown existing ones, and given a test bed to collaboration. With this track record, it's no surprise that Seagram is still hatching plans. When a study commissioned by the UTAS Centre for Food Innovation recommended Launceston as the site for a specialist fermentation facility, part of a suite of food production facilities across the north, it struck a chord with Seagram.

The state's internationally competitive wine, cider, beer and whisky have proven that commanding premium price for premium product is a viable strategy. Why, she asks, are we producing 10 per cent of the national milk yield, yet have only 14 cheese producers? And why, with our fertile soils, are we not extracting value from the market for fermented vegetables which is on our doorstep across Asia. In tying our produce to international commodity prices, or ploughing some of it back into the soil, rather than value-adding, she believes we are selling Tasmania short. Add to that the re-discovery of fermentation as our oldest food preserving culture, and new interest in its health benefits, and the possibilities are exponential.

Gathering a cohort of senior names from craft and mainstream brewing, food innovation and agri-industry consulting, Kim Seagram now chairs an industry focus group, FermenTasmania. Since their first "get together for dinner" at Stillwater when she had to "kick them out at one in the morning", they have won a grant from Food Innovation Australia for \$840,000 in operational funding. Seagram's next step is to lobby government in pursuit of backing for the multi-million dollar bricks and mortar facility – business incubator, trade and tourism visitor centre rolled into one, and a world first. 🍷